

Waiting

Isaiah 40:1-5, Mark 1:1-4

Today, together, we begin Advent again. The theme is “Pilgrimage to Bethlehem: Journey Inward, Journey Outward.” We are reaching in and reaching out. A pilgrimage is a journey into the discovery of one’s self and of God. The two are deeply connected.

This week’s theme is “Waiting.” Who likes to wait?! At the grocery store check-out line, at the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles, at Bojangles, even at a 60-second traffic light. Someone would get rich developing a non-addictive waiting-in-line pill to help you chill as you wait.

But what about spiritual waiting? A waiting for God, a waiting for you to become the person you want to be. To be able to love better and be rid of what novelist Reynolds Price calls our “loyal flaws”.

In the New Testament hope is a theological concept, a now. In the Old Testament hope is more a verb, a waiting, waiting for God, for deliverance for life to come again. It is a being-on-the-lookout for God. Who wants to wait for what one already has?

I

Hope as waiting is one of the major themes of the Hebrew scriptures. The psalms are full of it:

Wait for the Lord, be strong.

I wait for you all the day long.

I wait for the Lord; my soul waits.

The quality of such waiting is of a hopeful waiting, a trust that God and God's goodness will come. Waiting without hope is a form of dread. A friend of Anne Lamott's said to her "Annie, I live my life waiting for the other shoe to drop." Lamott answered, "Hon, God doesn't have another shoe." Or to put it another way, what if the other shoe was a happiness you never expected to have?

II

Our text from Isaiah, our "Word of God in Promise", is the joyful exclamation that the terrible time of waiting is coming to an end. These words are the beginning of the part of Isaiah we call "Second Isaiah", chapters 40-66. This Isaiah wrote 200 years later, after the original Isaiah. The Hebrew people have been languishing in Babylonian captivity over several generations. But now God is on the way to bring them home from Exile. The two great rescue events in Hebrew scripture are the Exodus, freedom from slavery in Egypt and the Return Home from Exile in Babylon.

The prophet begins with these most wonderful words: "Comfort, comfort ye my people." Advent often begins in my heart as I hear the opening tenor solo in Handel's *Messiah*: "Comfort, comfort ye my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem."

When has someone spoken tenderly to you? Wherever you are, it feels like coming home. When have you been comforted? It feels like coming home, or home

coming to you. Can you imagine speaking tenderly to you? God does here in these words.

III

God's voice rings out in joy:

In the wilderness prepare

the way of the Lord

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.

A Camino Real, a Royal Highway for our Lord.

It starts in the wilderness. Deliverance always begins in the wilderness, in exile as we long for home. The wilderness takes many forms: a physical illness, a spiritual dislocation, a depression, a life turned upside down. Sometimes the time in the wilderness can be a long time. But now it's time to go home, God is on the way.

So the prophet calls us to make a way for the Lord.

Make straight in the desert a highway. And look!

Every valley shall be lifted up

every mountain and hill made low

The uneven ground becomes smooth

and the ridges a plain.

We're not talking about strip mining here! I saw a photo of a billboard in Kentucky promoting the coal industry. It used these words from Isaiah to justify strip mining! As Shakespeare said, "The devil can cite scripture for his purpose."

We are not talking about landscaping here, nut the "in-scape" of the soul. How do we make the way smooth for God to come into our lives? I am sure my parents did that for me. For sure there are things to clear away obstacles that prevent God's coming. In an attempt to defend our lives, we end up inadvertently defending ourselves against God. So we sweep away the debris. Hope is not passive but active. We are getting ready for the God we've been on the look-out for.

Dare we talk about silence and stillness as a way of preparing the way of the Lord. Especially as we stand on the precipice of the luge run of the Christmas season with all its demands and frenzy. Sometimes the stillness and silence do not arrive until Christmas Even when we sing "Silent Night". So God invites us: Take Time and Make Space. If it were easy, God wouldn't need to remind us!

Being still is itself a form of prayer. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, said once that he prayed for two minutes, then he added, "But it takes me 28 minutes to get there." That sounds about right to me. Twenty-eight minutes of going around my soul's house shutting the windows and doors to all the noise and distraction, then blessedly, two minutes of prayer, dwelling with and in God.

Sometimes the waiting can become despairingly long. The Hebrew people had sunk into such despair. “how can I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land”, they cried. “How long, O Lord.” “Where is your steadfast love?” But now the time of exile is over, the time of deliverance has come.

Chapter 40 ends with some of the most powerful words of hope I know:

God gives power to the faint
 and strengthens the powerless
 Even youths will faint and be weary
 and the young will fall exhausted
 but those who wait for the Lord
 shall renew their strength.

They shall mount up with wings like eagles
 they shall run and not be weary
 they shall walk and not faint.

There will come days when we mount up with wings like eagles, days when we can run and not be weary. But there are also days when what we need most is to walk and not faint. And that will be enough.

V

Our word from Isaiah is the Word of God in Promise. Our gospel lesson is the Word of God in Fulfilment. It is the beginning of Mark and Mark calls it the beginning

of the gospel. And where does this goodnews, *evangelion*, gospel begin? Yes, it begins again in the wilderness. Mark begins by echoing the words from Isaiah:

Prepare the way for the Lord
make his way straight.

He is not just quoting Isaiah, he is saying. It is happening again!

The Hebrew people had longed for the coming Messiah. They believed that Elijah would return from heaven and prepare his way. And John, Mark says, the one in animal skins and wading in the Jordan, he is Elijah. He is preparing the coming of the Lord. Baptism is preparing the way.

Mark Twain is quoted as saying, "History never repeats itself, but it does rhyme." Yes it does, rhyme for better and for worse. The gospel for this day of waiting and hoping is better captured in the words of Irish Poet, Seamus Haeney:

History says
Don't hope on this side of the grave
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

Advent is a time when hope and history rhyme. Our hope is not just a hope of heaven but a human and historical hope.

An Exodus, a Return Home from Exile. The end of slavery in America. Voting rights for women and blacks. The Civil Rights Movement. The end of apartheid in South Africa. Non-violent action turns Deck and Rutch engine in India. Historical moments of justice and grace, when hope and history rhyme. Our Lord came and comes again and again.

VI

Some of you are fans of the rock band U-2. One of their greatest hits has the poignant refrain: “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” Advent comes to focus our gaze. It asks, “What are you looking for?” What is the thing in your life worth looking for?”

Our carols, our hymns, our anthems and scripture help turn our faces to the One more than anything or anyone worth waiting for watching for looking for.

Our pilgrimage to Bethlehem is a journey inward, journey outward. It goes deep and it reaches out. We will meet the Christ within, and we will meet the Christ in each other.

“O Come, O come Immanuel!”

Amen

Almighty God

In whose Eternity our transient

lives are held,
whose will is our peace,
who has come among us in
great humility,
make us wise to wait for Thee
to wish for Thee
to watch for Thee
until the breaking of the day.

Amen

(George A. Buttrick)