

2017.12.10

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

2 Peter 3:8-15a

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

While you wait...

In every line, in every waiting room, in every theatre and concert hall, I have observed three distinct categories of those who wait.

There are those who constantly check the time and sigh in exasperation.

Those who pull a book out of the recesses of a bag or an inside coat pocket.

And, then there are the ones who start random conversations with whoever is nearby – usually to the discomfort of their spouse and children.

I tend to fall in the third category. I come by it naturally. When my classmates and friends were being told of stranger danger in the mid-1980s culture of milk carton faces and fear of kidnappers in every van, my father was teaching me a different lesson. My father has never met a stranger. In lines, in waiting rooms, on buses, in hardware stores and grocery stores, my father will start a conversation with anybody! And, generally, within about 5 minutes he knows their whole life story. And those people walk away from that interaction feeling genuinely interesting and genuinely heard. Waiting, for my father, is never just about whatever is going to happen when the wait is over – it’s about what happens in the meantime.

The community to which Second Peter is addressed is dealing with the “in the meantime.” This letter was probably written toward the end of the first century or the beginning of the second. A generation or two has passed since Jesus’ death and resurrection. The church has moved from its Jewish roots into the realm of the Gentiles – from apostolic control to a new generation of leaders who did not see Jesus face to face or speak directly with Peter, Paul and the others. This is a church that is realizing that their expectations were – perhaps – a little off – a church that is learning the difference between expectation and expectancy. They earnestly believed and desired that the second coming of Jesus would happen within their lifetime, but more and more were realizing that there was what seemed to be a delay. As the earlier generations were passing away, they realized that the things they had been taught needed to be written down for future generations. Because, perhaps, in spite of their expectations, there might actually be future generations. New questions were arising about how to move forward and how

to organize the church for the unanticipated long haul ahead, and how to continue to live in expectant hope while recognizing that their expectations had been dashed.

The world in which this community lived was a chaotic and confusing place. Cultural and religious clashes resulted in oppression, abuse, and fear. As this new religion was finding its way through the growing pains of establishing what it stood for, what it believed, and how it would behave in the world, the world around them offered so much distraction. A full third of this letter is dedicated to warning the readers about false teachers and false prophets who will “secretly bring in destructive opinions (2 Peter 2:1)”. People are confused. They hear the voices asking them why they continue to wait for someone who is obviously never coming. And they have to ask themselves, what’s the point? Even if Jesus *is* actually coming back to set the world right, why worry about what we do in the meantime? If this world and all its problems will be swept away and replaced by a new heaven and a new earth, why not enjoy this life while it lasts and do what feels good and expedient in this moment?

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So... this is where I got stuck when I was writing my sermon this week. I tend to structure my sermons in the format I learned in Basic Preaching - “The Four Pages of the Sermon.” I am sorry to say this does not mean that my sermon is only four pages long... What it means is that there are four basic parts - The problem in the text, the problem in the world, the good news in the text, and the good news in the world. So, we begin with the question of what is happening in the scripture that the people to which it was originally addressed are dealing with? Then we move to the problem in the world. What is happening in our world, right now, that this particular situation in the text might help us to understand.

This is where I got stuck. You see, it seems that every time I turn on the radio, or glance at a newspaper, or open Facebook or my email, I am met with yet another story of interminable waiting.

People waiting for test results or to begin the next course of treatment.

My friends who are waiting for the adoption process to bring a child into their lives after four miscarriages and stillborn twins.

People waiting for those that harmed them to be brought to justice.

People waiting for someone to listen to them – and to really hear their stories.

People waiting for elections and accusations and indictments.

People waiting for peace in their countries, their world, their neighborhoods.

People waiting for someone to do something about pollution and global climate change.

People waiting for the services they need to come through so that they can have shelter, food, or mental health care.

People waiting for the simple recognition of their own human dignity.

And I got stuck. Where do I even begin with the stories of waiting? Which issue do I choose to focus on? We all have stories of waiting. We all have something that we are waiting for. Perhaps, then, I thought, I am beginning from the wrong question.

Turning back to the text, I looked again for what questions are raised, and I realized that the main questions for the community in the text were not – what are we waiting for and when will it get here? The question addressed in this passage was, instead, what do we do while we wait?

The writer of this letter points out to the readers that time does not flow for us in the same way it flows for God. What feels like a long, long, LONG delay to us, is but a moment of

patience for God. He also points out that this waiting time is not a time to sit around. It is not a time to become complacent or to indulge ourselves at the expense of the world or of others. During this time of waiting, we have work to do... and the good news is, God is giving us the time to do it.

In Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, the two main characters wait for someone named Godot – who (spoilers!) never actually appears in the play. What is striking about this, is that these two men do nothing but wait, fight with one another, and make idle, meaningless (albeit very funny) chit-chat. At one point, they hear someone cry for help. Vladimir turns to Estragon and says, "*Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something, while we have the chance!*" Ironically, they then go back to their idle discourse and never do anything of any real value while they continue to wait for someone who may or may not come at some unknown and unappointed time, while cries for help continue in the background.

The writer of 2 Peter challenges his readers to move beyond waiting, beyond idle discourse, into action. Yes, we wait. But while we wait, who should we be? How should we live the lives we are called to in service to God? "In accordance with God's promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation."

We wait. AND while we wait, we strive to be found at peace. But what does that peace look like? John Calvin defined this sort of peace as "the quietness of a soul at ease which rests on the Word of God." A soul at ease. So how do we rest on the Word of God in such a way that puts our souls at ease? Dr. Richard Davis suggests that "To be found at peace means to be found on the front lines of action for reconciliation and justice." After all, how can we be at peace when

our brothers and sisters are hungry or homeless? When the meager shelter they have managed to find is lost to a fire in one terrifying night? How can our souls be at ease when entire island nations are threatened by rising sea levels? How can we be found at peace when a tidal wave of women – and people of all genders – is crashing on the shores of the American establishment crying ME TOO!?! How can our souls be at ease when the color of one’s skin is still seen as a marker of one’s character or humanity? How can we be found at peace when the political climate of the country and the world continues to become more divided and angry.

Being found at peace is not something we simply wait for – it is something we *strive* for, something we work for.

We cannot make God’s timing our own. But we cannot passively wait, either. The waiting we are called to is active. There will never be a time when it is safe or easy to speak out against injustice. But the author of 2 Peter calls his community – and that call continues for us today – to create a world in which righteousness is at home. We must strive to be found at peace, by preparing a way for love.

There is never a good time. The world was chaotic and ravaged by war and oppression on the night when God took on the most vulnerable flesh to walk among us. The world was chaotic and ravaged by war and oppression when the words of scripture we read today were written.

These words, written by Madeleine L’Engle in 1973 ring just as true in 2017:

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour and truth were trampled by scorn—
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn—
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

When is the time for love to be born? And what are we doing to prepare the way – while we
wait?

Amen.