

Waiting, Hoping, and Trusting

Isaiah 25:6-10

Romans 8:18-28

Listen for repeated words, or themes. Also, listen with your heart; listen for the sense of longing, desire and expectation.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for

words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

This is the word of the Lord.

This passage from Romans 8 may seem like an odd text for Advent—no Mary and Joseph, or angels and shepherds and all that. Not yet. However, you may be surprised to learn that it *is* a traditional text for the season—because it expresses a longing for the coming of Christ, and for redemption, esp. final redemption, when God brings fulfillment to all things in his Kingdom. It expresses hope in the midst of a suffering world; it speaks to a *waiting*, for fulfillment, and resolution. Both people, and creation itself, are waiting for freedom from suffering, and full freedom and redemption when Jesus comes again and God brings history to its grand fulfillment. This is a strong theme of Advent—not only remembering the waiting before Christ’s *first* coming; it’s also the waiting for Christ’s *second* coming in fulfillment.

We begin the season of Advent where we look **back** and remember the hope and longing for a savior to come into the world, and we celebrate how God fulfilled his promise of that savior. And we are in a Second Advent where we look

forward with hope and longing for his second coming, when all will be fulfilled, and all will be well.

But for now, we wait. With hope and expectation; maybe groaning, to use Paul's language. And with patience.

In pursuing this theme of hope and waiting, in preparation for today's message, I turned to one of the great theologians of recent history... Dr. Seuss. Who speaks of this waiting... Doesn't it feel like we're all in the waiting place this year? This year feels so different. These past two years, actually!

What are you waiting for this advent season? Aside from things covid-related, or political. Personally, what are you waiting for? I mean, something significant, something that seems out of your grasp and control. Something you long for deep in your heart. Here is another way to put it: what prayer are you waiting for God to answer right now? Something only God can give, or something only God can change, or heal.

In Paul's words from Romans 8, what is that thing that you hope for that you cannot see yet (because hope that is seen is not hope, right?).

Life is an ebb and flow of good times and hard times. It's full of pleasure and pain, success and struggle, contentment and confusion. And Scripture is realistic about that—and that's what the apostle Paul is saying here. He uses

pregnancy images here, and labor pains to describe what we experience in our lives from time to time. We're waiting for some kind of birth and new life, but in the process of waiting it may be uncomfortable, maybe even painful, and it may seem like it's taking FOREVER to arrive.

Again: What is it that you hope for? What are you waiting for? What prayer are you waiting for God to answer?

Maybe you're simply waiting for just *something* from God; anything! Just show me that you exist, and that you care! Just send me a sign! Someone told me recently that they were crying out to God like this while sitting on their sofa and in the middle of their prayer their cat came and sat on their lap and started purring, which wasn't typical. Can God speak through a cat? Well, to quote the angel Gabriel, with God all things are possible.

What are you waiting for? What are you hoping for?

In this in-between time of the already and the not yet of God's Kingdom (it's inaugurated in Jesus Christ, but not yet fulfilled) we are called to trust in God's promises, and exercise patience. Waiting with patience as Paul says in Romans 8.

But waiting with patience is not something that comes easily to us, does it? Largely because it is not a strong value or virtue in our culture and therefore not

encouraged in us. In fact, merchandisers bank on you and me being impulsive and quick on the draw with our credit cards and our appetites, especially at this time of year.

But patience a key virtue in the life of Christian faith. It's one of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience... In that famous love chapter in 1Cor.13 Paul puts it at the top of the list of his attributes of love: "love is patient, love is kind..." Dang it! We want solutions and quick fixes to our problems, not patience. We want answers, not waiting. We are uncomfortable with being uncomfortable. One of our kids' friends, a couple weeks before Christmas, when she saw some gifts under our tree: "All this waiting makes me want to throw something!" Maybe we feel similarly about something in our lives right now.

This word "patience" (or longsuffering or endurance as it is sometimes translated) applies to situations where we don't have control, and we have to deal with life as it is at this moment. For example, on a smaller scale, we can't control the traffic when we're trying to get to an appointment, or to an event. But we do have the ability to control how we react to it. On a larger scale, we can't control that a loved one is sick and is facing treatment or surgery or an unknown future. But we can become willing to try to exercise endurance while waiting for surgery or treatment or test results.

The Bible doesn't say it's easy. We're never promised that. Somewhere in our American version of Christianity we have come to believe that God promises us an easy, comfortable life. But we are not promised that. The Bible doesn't say it's easy. The Bible says that with God, all things are possible. Because God is with you. Emmanuel, God with us, right?

This is what the angel Gabriel affirms when he visits Mary and tells her God's plan—that she will become pregnant and bear the Savior of the world. Gabriel says, *"Nothing shall be impossible with God."* And Mary accepts this truth. And, in Catholic tradition, Mary is venerated, in large part, because of her patience, her longsuffering. Not only for waiting on God and trusting this pregnancy plan, but her whole life is a model of the virtue of patience as she has to consent to her son Jesus living his life as he is called to live it, and as she witnesses his suffering, and dying his death according to God's plan. She's out of control. But she exercises patience, and trust. Longsuffering, if you will. It wasn't easy for her (Simeon points this out to her after Jesus is born), but there was a bigger plan unfolding, which she trusted in God to work out.

And so, when the Biblical writers speak of waiting and patience, it is more than just simple patience with others, or with an everyday situation like bad traffic or an obnoxious person. It also includes—and ultimately means—patience

in waiting on the Lord to act on your behalf, or on behalf of someone you care about, or waiting on God to set things right in the world. And that can be harder because the occasional situations (the obnoxious person, the bad traffic)—those come and go, and can sometimes be avoided. But the deeper things we long for and are waiting for—that healing, that relationship to be mended, that relief from physical or emotional pain, that spiritual breakthrough—we live with those every day as we wait for God to act, and resolve. And patience (longsuffering, endurance) can be a challenge to exercise.

Advent is that time when we remember that God fulfills his promises. That's actually a good definition of hope: Remembering and believing that God fulfills his promises. God keeps promises. Can I get an amen to that??

The good news is that God does act. Scripture tells us that, clearly and often. Now, the hard news that comes along with the good news, is that God's timing is not our timing. There is promise of fulfillment, yet we are not given a specific time line for when God will accomplish his promises. And that's where patience and waiting come in. That ability to be patient, or longsuffering about the Lord's timing and actions.

My friend Scott puts it this way: God loves a drama. Think of all the stories in Scripture, and perhaps even from your life and the lives of others, when God

waits until the last minute, it seems, to answer and fulfill his promise. Exodus is a great example: When the people of God are enslaved in Egypt, God's promise was that he would redeem his people; that he would set them free. And they *are* turned loose from slavery and it looks like the promise is fulfilled, but as soon as they get out of Egypt they are pursued by the entire Egyptian army until they get to the shore of the Red Sea (because that's where God tells them to go). So they're trapped: the Red Sea in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them in hot pursuit. Now what? The Egyptians get closer and closer and you can hear Moses and the people saying, "Now would be a good time to do something, Lord!" And of course, God does—at the last minute. And it's surprising. Parting the Red Sea is probably not what they imagined God would do. God loves a drama. And surprise outcomes.

And there are countless stories in Scripture where God seems to wait to the last minute before he acts. But God does act. Now, I don't know about you, but the problem I have with that is, I *don't* like a drama. I am so NOT a drama person. I come from good German stock where everything runs on time and according to a schedule. But I've come to a place of appreciating, and maybe even enjoying, the fact, that though God *does* love a drama, and that God's outcomes for me are always good. And God's outcomes for you are always good. God does act.

So, the good news is that God does act, but it's always on **God's** time frame and not ours. **And** it's according to God's bigger plan. That's true from the Exodus story, it's true from the Christmas story (stories), and it's and true in our stories as well. God sees the big picture; we don't always see it. And that's why God invites us to trust him. Because God sees the bigger picture. Our vision is limited.

So, God waits because he loves a drama, and because his actions are part of his bigger plan... but I also believe God waits sometimes because he wants to get you and me to a point where we stop relying on ourselves and we can only find hope in him. We have nowhere else to turn but to the Lord and his power and love.

As I like to say, sometimes God lets a difficult situation become more difficult, seemingly impossible, so that the answer, when it comes, can only be explained by his power at work. It provides us the opportunity to trust him more, and to experience his goodness and love. Again, that's true of the Exodus story, and the Christmas story(ies), and perhaps our story as well.

And again, the good and sometimes hard news is: God is never in a hurry.

American proverb: "It takes 9 months to have a baby, no matter how many people you put on the job." Some things can't be hurried! The apostle Paul

uses that pregnancy metaphor in our reading from Romans this morning, as a way of talking about that waiting and longing and hoping. There is nothing we can do to bring things about any faster. Only in God's time and in God's way.

However, we can do *something* while we wait. Waiting and exercising patience doesn't mean that we sit around and twiddle our thumbs until something happens. We participate prayerfully; we find ways to pray and act with expectation. Because, we believe that God keeps his promises, and we prepare for God's promises to come to fruition.

I almost titled this sermon, "Hope is a verb." It isn't just something we have; it's something we exercise. With patience and trust. Hope is both a noun and a verb. Here is my favorite example...

Eugene Peterson story... Anticipating the birth of his first grandchild, in an excited way but also in a worried and anxious sort of way, and was making his wife nuts. Pacing the floor, wondering out loud about all of the things that could go wrong, or what will this child be like, will his son and daughter in law be good parents, restless at night, etc. His wife said, "Please do something! You're making me crazy." So, he decided to go to the garage and make a cradle for the baby. And over the months in his garage as he cut the pieces of wood, and sanded them, and put the pieces together, he would pray. The garage became a holy

place, a prayer room, a place of worship. He would pray for his coming grandchild and ask God's blessings upon that child; and he prayed for his son and daughter in law—for her health and protection and peace, and for both of them as they prepared for parenthood. And he prayed for children and families that he knew, and others he didn't know around the world. It was a wonderful way to anticipate and *participate* in the fulfillment of what was coming.

And when we find ourselves restless or anxious in our waiting, and our anticipation of God's outcome, we are invited to prayerfully participate somehow, as an act of hope. Of making hope a verb.

But what if we don't know what to do, or how to pray or act? Well, here is more good news: the Spirit prays with us, and in us. Did you catch that in the reading? The Spirit intercedes for us. Where we are weak, or uncertain, or struggling, we can invite the Spirit to be our prayer leader and companion. We don't have to have everything figured out. We are invited to trust. And we can do something, even if it's just doing the next right thing right in front of us.

Hope is longing for good, and confidence that God will act. Heb.11:1: faith is the *assurance* of things ***hoped for***, the conviction of things not seen." God IS at work, in our lives and in the world, even if for a time we don't see it clearly. Because one day, we will.

The Isaiah 25 passage speaks of a time when all will be fulfilled, when there will be great feasting and great joy: the shroud of darkness is lifted (think of shrouds of darkness like depression, despair, fear, or stress. They will be gone!). There will be brightness like a warm spring day. No more tears. No more disgrace.

“It will be said on that day (quoting from verse 9), *“look, this is our God, we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

What are you waiting for? What are you hoping for? Put your trust in the Lord—he will act.

Now the Heavens Start to Whisper