

"Waiting for God"
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Isaiah 40:21-31 NRSV
Sunday, July 25th, 2021
Medford UMC, NJ

Let us pray: Holy God, enter into this space letting your Spirit be known to all. With your sacred Word having been read, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, Lord, this day and every day. Amen.

Have you ever read or seen the play "Waiting for Godot"? In my undergraduate studies in theatre, one of my least favorite genres was absurdism, which is basically what it sounds like. Absurdism is a fictional, non-realistic form of artistic expression. It tends to be quirky and nonsensical and be drenched in subtle hidden meanings and statements. And I get that it was created in response to World War II to exemplify the horrifying absurdity of what human nature could be, but I just didn't get it. Classmates of mine were awestruck. I was bored.

The one absurdist play I feel like I've seen roughly 100 times at this point is Samuel Beckett's famous "Waiting for Godot", and once again, I didn't get it. You have these 2 guys, Vladamir and Estragon, who are under a tree waiting around for Godot, who never arrives, and they spend a lot of time arguing how and where and when to wait. Their impatience makes it so they don't finish anything, they keep repeating the same words and activities over and over, and they can't seem to actually come up with a reason why they should even wait for Godot, what the point even is, but they do anyway.

So then this messenger comes to tell them that Godot won't arrive until the next day, and they come up with all these

things they should do instead of waiting around twiddling their fingers but then they just end up doing nothing. The next day the messenger tells them the same thing and the vicious cycle of their inactive and impatient waiting continues.

Scholars have tried dissecting the theological and ethical nature of this play for decades, but I bring this up not only because Godot sounds an awful lot like God, but that when I was really trying to engage myself in a deep dialogue with today's Isaiah text, I found myself thinking a lot about this play which is centered around living in seemingly endless waiting, waiting that wears us down and makes us doubt, and struggling to grasp why we even wait, and what we're supposed to do while we wait. The last verse of today's text reads: "but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength".

Now, this scripture text can make waiting sound kind of like a scary obligation. It talks about how those who do not "wait" for God grow weary and fall down exhausted and wither away. It can be interpreted that we should then feel guilty for all the times we didn't wait for God, the times we searched and tried to force God into what we wanted. It can be used as almost a fear-mongering tool, but we all know that the second someone says "just be patient" well now we just can't think about anything else!

This is a rabbit hole. The guilt then makes us impatient, which is the ultimate problem we are tackling in this series on "The Power of Patience". That impatience then makes us do things we know we shouldn't, say things without thinking, and loops us into a vicious cycle of getting angry with God for making us wait, instead of actively waiting *with* the Lord and seeing all

the ways God is present in our day to day lives while we wait for ... well, whatever it may be that we're waiting for, a raise, a booster shot to the vaccine, to see a loved one again, and so on.

Let's take me writing this sermon for example. I wanted it done, God wasn't working with my schedule, so I wrote a terrible draft, I mean just truly awful. Then I got mad, and was basically like, "Well, I tried. It's not my fault, Lord, that you were quiet through the whole thing!" Which then just made me put off trying to improve it, until finally said "Alright, I'm listening" and it was as if all the sudden, everywhere I turned, everyone was in the mood to talk about this patience and the joy in waiting, it was so weird! God was trying to pass me the cheat sheet the whole time, but my unwillingness to wait only made it harder to hear God. This is the part where I look up and say, "yeah, yeah, yeah you big showoff!" I do that a lot apparently.

But why does waiting make us uneasy? Why does something so simple in principle seem impossible? I'm terrible at it. I cannot tell you the amount of people in my life who have asked me some version of the question of, "Well if there's nothing you can do about it right now, why are you worrying about it?" Because I like to worry! I like to have more control of this unpredictable, twisting and turning life!

For me, my hesitation in actively waiting for God, in struggling to write on such a subject stems from being tired, tired of exhausting "what ifs". People in the world are tired of wondering when if the bills will get paid, or if the layoff's will reach them; tired of seeing the destruction on the news, of hearing about greater tensions in the world, we are tired of

being told to wait. We are tired. Does this sound at all familiar?

Isaiah is a bit of a complicated book to say the least, you know, compared to all the simple books in the Bible. So, today's text is right in the beginning of what scholars have broken down to be "Isaiah 2", Isaiah 1 is before the exile, Isaiah 2 is the Israelites in exile ... again. Earlier in the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites grew impatient during the Exodus. Here, in today's text, with the Israelites in exile again, all of that vulnerability and listening and patience that they learned about then? It's reared its face once again. Isaiah 2 promises that restoration will come soon, just wait patiently. This text is surrounded by poetry of crying out for God's redemption when all hope seems lost, even the beginning part of this very chapter has a much more somber note than the section we're focusing on today. This text, instead, begs for hope in the everlasting nature of God.

Verse 28 reads, "He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable." This idea of an unsearchable God is compelling to me, because it kind of makes me feel like, "wait, what? Then what have I been searching for this whole time?" There are times, and I bet I'm not alone in this, that God does not appear to be an active part of my daily life. There are times when the heavenly radio sounds like static. It's disorienting. I pray, I fudge my way through some spiritual disciplines, and I wonder why I seem to be left in the dark. But often times, I end up looking back at those periods in my life and in hindsight can easily point out all the ways God was active that I completely overlooked in the moment.

I get so focused on the ways I think that God should be acting in my life, that I overlook what God is actually doing. I'm searching for the unsearchable. I'm impatient. I'm not willing to wait. I want it to look exactly how I think it should look, and I want it to look that way right now. This "unsearchable understanding" of God gives us wiggle room to cry out, "this doesn't make sense! I don't understand!" It encourages us to bring that to God instead of trying to find that hope somewhere else. Bring it to God. Then wait.

What's so interesting about this idea of waiting seen here is that it is not the passive state that we tend to assume it is.

Waiting is an action.

Waiting is purposeful.

Waiting requires great focus.

Waiting requires patience.

Waiting is very, very difficult.

But notice that waiting doesn't present itself in all the ways we expect it to. This chapter concludes with: "they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Some days our hope and faith will mount us up like eagles. We soar, we're on top of the world. Other days, our hope and faith is simply what gets us will ourselves out of bed, out of that slump and face the day. What we wait for, what God is doing for each one of us is so vastly diverse and one thing may look like a blessing while another might not but that doesn't mean it's not the grace of God.

Soaring or just getting up. Focus on what God is doing, and that grace becomes clearer. In the waiting comes clarity. In the waiting, there is then space to acknowledge God in the nuances of life.

It makes me think of that famous Stanford study, the Great Marshmallow Experiment. The experiment, which tested children's ability of self-control and patience, showed that the kids who were able to wait to eat the marshmallow in order to get an extra marshmallow ended up doing much better in life long-term. They were healthier, more highly educated, and tested better in school. But waiting can be one of the most difficult things to do. It's so tough to just let your worries go because there is nothing that can be done about them in this given moment. It's so tough to wait for test results from the doctor, or for an unemployment check to come, or for I mean even just the new episode of our favorite show to be released. We're used to everything being so easily accessible to us.

But if waiting is the answer, how can these Israelites in exile offer us such redemptive words as those here in Isaiah 40? How can we look at all that has us beaten down and tired and keep waiting? I think about a verse from what my family calls "The Callender Psalm". It's a verse of Psalm 16 that my family has used as their grounding rock for generations, they're the words that make us stop and reflect and give thanks: "The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage."

When was the last time that you stopped, that you looked at the feet beneath you, that you took in where you are, who you're with, who you've become and acknowledged the grace that you've

been blessed with; "the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places". The redeeming hand of God is found in the places least expected. When we fly like eagles or just make ourselves get out of bed. What seems like the worst possible situation can be drenched in God's grace. God is found when we stop searching in all the places we expect God to be. It requires us to wait for God to reveal God's handwork on God's own time. It requires patience. It requires waiting. God's own time, can feel slow, can feel frustrating. It can feel like waiting for Godot. We have been challenged to wait in ways we never expected during the pandemic, and it's not over. We should support one another in this season of continued waiting, to put our focus and patience towards God because of the redeeming nature of the Lord that scripture teaches us when we, "Lift up [our] eyes on high and see". Amen.