

Sermon “The Art of Waiting”

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-4, I Corinthians 1: 4-9

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On this First Sunday in Advent both scripture readings touch on a time of waiting in the lives of believers. The first reading is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 64, verses 1-4. Here the Israelites join in a communal lament about their waiting for God—wondering if it will ever end. Scholars conclude that this hymn may have been a part of their worship during the years of exile in Babylon. This is the Word of God.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—² as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.⁴ From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for God. Amen.

As we turn through the pages of time several hundred years since the prophet Isaiah spoke to the Israelites in exile, we find God’s people waiting once again. In first Corinthians 1:4-9, the Apostle Paul gives thanks for the first generation of Christians who eagerly await the revealing of their Risen Savior. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by God you were called into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “The Art of Waiting”

Text: ...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 1:7

Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you for the season of Advent in each of our lives when we are asked to wait. During this Advent Season, teach us the art of waiting. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

(pause)

“Those first moments before a preacher begins to speak are the most powerful...” according to Ian Pitt-Watson, author of The Folly of Preaching. “The power is in the silence, in the pause before anything is said. And what makes this time so powerful is the expectation of the people waiting. The hope that somehow their hearts will be touched by the Word of God.”

Ian Pitt-Watson was my preaching professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1980. We had been awaiting his arrival with much anticipation following an interim on the faculty. I remember the first time I heard him preach God's word at the Pasadena Presbyterian Church, which was just a block from the seminary campus. He was a slightly build, kind of a gangly man in his late fifties, who had come to Fuller from Edinburgh, Scotland.

I was not in the greatest place personally when Dr. Pitt-Watson arrived at Fuller. I was coming to terms with unwelcome medical news that the partial recovery of my facial paralysis was complete. I was hopeful for a long time that I would fully recover and was now beginning a journey of accepting a new reality.

In addition, I was beginning a three-year ordination process in the Presbyterian Church, following a disappointing decision in the Reformed Church of America regarding ordination of women. I would not be eligible for ordination until two years following my graduation from seminary.

I longed for a word of hope when our new Professor of Preaching stepped into the pulpit. What a gift he was to me at this crossroads in my life! Ian Pitt-Watson nourished my spirit in the pulpit, gave me the tools to preach in the classroom, and he encouraged me to be a better preacher. Dr. Pitt-Watson was my mentor and my inspiration, and I adored and respected this kind, unpretentious man whom God brought into my life.

Many years later, following twenty-five years of ministry, Peter, Paul and I visited Edinburgh, Scotland on a journey that had been planned for a long time. Before the Morning Prayer Service at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, the mother church of Presbyterians, we stopped in the bookstore. I asked the older women who worked there if they knew of Ian Pitt-Watson and if he ever preached at St. Giles. Of course, they knew of him. His father was the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and, indeed, Dr. Pitt-Watson had served as assistant minister and preached at St. Giles!

A spontaneous smile, asymmetric as it is, spread across my face. A few minutes later, as I sat in the sacred space of this beautiful, gothic sanctuary with Peter and Paul and listened to a bell choir play familiar hymns, I was overcome with tears of gratitude. Gratitude for the richness of the journey I had traveled, for the waiting that has been a part of that journey, and for God's faithfulness along the way.

This morning I invite us to explore the art of waiting. There is not a great moment in our lives that has not been made greater in the anticipation...in the waiting.

There is a plot and a purpose in our waiting like the full measure rest before the final chord. To wait is not a bad consequence. It is not an absence or delay of experience but a deliberate action. Waiting involves the passage of time during which there can be healing, growth, introspection, and resolution. Waiting is also an integral part of human growth and development. It is at the heart of our growing up and our becoming God's children. Studies demonstrate that the ability to wait, to delay gratification, and to demonstrate self-control are key factors in our coming into our own as adults.

Because we live in a culture that devalues and admonishes waiting, we need to reclaim the time, as well as the art, for ourselves and for our children. In this world of advanced technology,

telecommunications, and immediate gratification, waiting is often viewed as a sign of failure and an obstacle to our liberties. *I want what I want, and I want it now!!*

Believing that God is taking initiative on our behalf, which our biblical faith affirms, is an important factor in our ability to wait, to wait with hope, and to wait well. When children know their parents or teachers have their best interest in mind, they are better equipped to wait their turn. How we view our Creator's role in our destiny, likewise, affects our ability to wait. The art of waiting well is learning that delicate balance between taking creative initiative and practicing Holy indifference.

Both of our Scripture readings today address people of faith who are waiting. Any of us whose season of waiting has gone on too long can identify with the prayer in Isaiah. The prophet, on behalf of the people and with the metaphor of water coming to boil, cries out to Yahweh to break through their season of waiting during 59 years of Babylonian exile. It has gone on too long! There is pain and anguish in these words and, simultaneously, in the very act of their utterance, is hope.

Today in the lighting of the advent candle we highlight the hope that is a part of our waiting. Ironically, the Latin word for hope *espera* literally means "to wait." *Espera en Deo* is the motto of Hope College, my alma mater. *Espera en Deo* means to hope in God... We hope because of the Savior for whom we wait.

Like our brothers and sisters in Corinth, although we know the One whose birth we celebrate this season, we, too, wait for the fullness of God's presence and peace in our broken and warring world. May we wait in unity with all God's people, may we not be lacking in any spiritual gift in our waiting, and may God's spirit sustain, strengthen, and unite us as we wait in hope. Amen.