

Sermon – To Wait, To Hope, To Wonder  
Scripture - Isaiah 40:1-5, 30-31, Mark 1:1-8  
Sunday, December 7, 2014  
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On this Second Sunday of Advent, our first scripture reading is Isaiah 40:1-5 and 30-31. Disasters make people numb, afraid, and hopeless. They undermine faith in God and in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure. In the beginning of the sixth century BCE, Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, interrupted the economy, and deported leading citizens to Babylon; it occupied the land for fifty years. The exquisite poetry of Second Isaiah, beginning in chapter 40, emerges in the decades following the invasion, like a healing, life-creating song. Second Isaiah puts aside blaming and accusing speech, bursting out, instead, in lyric poetry of comfort, hope, and joy. (*Kathleen O'Connor, Feasting on the Word*) This prophetic word is their anchor. Though everything else fails, God's word endures forever. The people wait for their reliable and loving God who prepares the way and who comes to lead them home. Listen now as God speaks to us in this time and place.

*1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken..."*

*30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 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.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:1-8. The good news of Mark's Gospel begins not with a birth story of Jesus (as in Matthew), not with the birth story of John the Baptist (as in Luke), and not with the beginning of time (as in John). Rather, the good news of the Gospel of Mark begins with a hearkening back to the words of the prophets and to an introduction of John, the Baptist who prepares the way for the "good news of Jesus Christ" with a call for repentance, for ethical renewal, and for a new beginning in baptism. (*Judy Yates Siker, Feasting on the Word*) Hear now God's Holy word.

*1 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."*

The title of the sermon: "To Wait, To Hope, To Wonder"

Let us pray. Holy and Loving 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 richness of waiting. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

*"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. We had been awaiting his arrival with much anticipation following an interim on the faculty. I remember the first time I heard him preach 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 about the recovery of my facial paralysis. I was hopeful for a long time that I would fully recover and was now beginning a journey of accepting a new reality. It was a time to mourn.

In addition I felt like my life had turned into a poorly played board game of "Sorry!" and life circumstances dealt the "Sorry" card, which said return to start. I was beginning a four 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 prodded me to be a better preacher. He was my mentor and my inspiration and I adored and respected this kind, unpretentious man whom God brought into my life.

Many years later when Peter, Paul and I visited Edinburgh, Scotland I couldn't help but think of Ian Pitt-Watson. Before the Morning Prayer Service at St. Giles, the mother church of Presbyterianism, we shopped in the bookstore. I asked the women who worked there if they had heard of Ian Pitt-Watson and if he ever preached at St. Giles. Of course, they knew of him. His father had served as the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and, indeed Dr. Pitt-Watson had preached at St. Giles!

A spontaneous smile, crooked as it may be, 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 felt a deep sense 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 importance 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 purpose

in our waiting. To wait is not a bad consequence. It is not an absence or delay of experience but a deliberate action. According to William Brown, "Waiting for God" is no passive endeavor; it involves painful longing and bold allegiance, in short, a passionate patience." 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.

Studies demonstrate that the ability to wait, to delay gratification and to demonstrate self-control is a key factor in our success as human beings. Around 1970, psychologist Walter Mischel launched the classic marshmallow experiment at Stanford University. He left a succession of 4 year-olds in a room with a bell and a marshmallow. If they rang the bell, he would come back and they could eat the marshmallow. If, however, they didn't ring the bell and waited for him to come back on his own, they could then have two marshmallows. In videos of the experiment you can see the children squirming, kicking, hiding their eyes – desperately trying to exercise self-control so they can wait and get two marshmallows.

Their performance varied widely. Some broke down and rang the bell within a minute. Others lasted 15 minutes. The children who waited longer went on to get higher SAT scores. The children who rang the bell more quickly were more likely to become bullies and to have addiction problems.

There is an art to waiting even as there is a time to wait. Because we live in a culture that devalues waiting, we need to reclaim the time as well as the art, for ourselves and for our children. In this world of instantaneous technology and immediate gratification waiting is unfortunately viewed as a sign of failure and an obstruction to our liberties. I want what I want and I want it now!!

Advent is a time to wait, to prepare our hearts and to reflect, not only on the joy and wonder of our God visiting us in the vulnerability of a child, but also on what is expected of each of us who call ourselves children of God. In our waiting and hoping, we receive renewed strength to keep on walking when the way is steep, to hold on to what is right when others wander from the path, to forgive those who trip us along the way, returning no one evil for evil, and to travel through life's detours, both the glory and the pain, with humility and integrity.

A few years ago I was reintroduced to the writings of Paul Tillich when I led a retreat in New Harmony, Indiana where his ashes are interred. Tillich is regarded as one of the five most influential theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a German pastor and theologian, Tillich spoke out against the Nazi movement. When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, he was dismissed from his seminary position. Reinhold Niebuhr visited Tillich in Germany that summer and urged him to join the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, which he did.

Paul Tillich was best known for his ability to integrate theology and psychology. In his classic book, *The Courage to Be*, he identifies three anxieties that come with being human: First, the anxiety of our mortality...*For each of us there is a time to be born and a time to die.* Second, the anxiety of meaninglessness...*At some point, our inner voices ask what is the purpose of our lives?* And finally, the anxiety of our morality; an acknowledgement of our sinfulness...*How can I make amends for the things I have done wrong and the people I have hurt?*

Tillich's observation is that human beings cause themselves more pain and unhealthy (neurotic) anxiety by acting out to avoid these normal anxieties that are a part of the human experience. We busy ourselves with tasks that serve as distractions; we participate in behavior that is

destructive rather than enter into the quiet places of solitude, embrace our inner journey and accept our mortality.

We have the *courage to be*, according to Tillich, because we are loved by a strong, yet gentle God who understands what it is to be human and have anxiety, being born in the Christ child. We have the *courage to die* because we have a God who conquered death by dying on a cross. And we have the *courage to live with meaning* because we have a God who lifts every valley, who makes low every mountain and hill, who levels the uneven ground and who smoothes the rough places creating a highway through the wilderness of our lives; we have a God who speaks tenderly to us in the places we are held captive and hold ourselves captive; and we have a God who heals our transgressions and renews our strength in the waiting and the hoping and the wondering of our lives.

My friends, may we experience the wonder and the hope of the One for whom we wait this Advent. And may the protests and demonstrations following recent grand jury decisions, which have interrupted our lives be more than a distraction, may they be a poignant reminder that we live in a world still in need of a level playing field, that there are rough places in need of the Balm of Gilead and shattered lives in need of justice to roll down like an ever flowing stream. May we be people who wait, who hope, who wonder and who work together to bring healing and comfort in the broken places of our world. Amen.