

Waiting for the Lord

Luke 2:22-40

We are coming to the close of the season of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting. Waiting in darkness. Waiting for Jesus, the light of the world to come. Waiting for Emmanuel, God with us.

In Advent we repeat an ancient practice, the practice of waiting. Waiting on God's promises. Waiting for the fulfilment of God's Word.

In the history of God's people we see a lot of waiting going on - The Israelites waited for 400 years in Egypt for deliverance from the Pharaohs. The exiled Israelites in Babylon waited 70 years for their release and return to Jerusalem. The entire Israelite nation waited 400 years from the last words of the prophets until the arrival of Jesus.

Elizabeth and Mary both waited anxiously for nine months for their sons to be born. Mary waited 40 days before being able to present herself and her newborn son in the Temple. At the Temple, the holy family met two elderly people who had waited decades to behold the promised Messiah of God.

This raises the question, "If waiting is a part of the history of God's people, what are we to do while we wait? Are we to just sit on our hands in anticipation of divine action?" The answer to that question is a very definitive NO!

We learn from the Bible that waiting is not passive but active. Take these examples:

While waiting for a child to be born to himself and his elderly wife, Abraham moved his family to a new country.

While waiting for release from Babylon, the exiles prayed for the prosperity of the city.

While waiting for Jesus to begin his earthly ministry, John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness to baptize people into a new life.

In each of these instances, people were asked by God to remain active while they waited. In fact, their actions while they waited were instrumental in bringing about that for which they were waiting. Forty years of waiting to arrive in the promised land, wandering in the desert, taught God's people to trust in his provision. Seventy years in exile gave God's people adequate time to repent of their sins and return to the Lord God. Waiting does not mean being idle or that God has forgotten his promises.

I can't speak to how the ancients might have felt about having to wait, although some of the Biblical stories give us a hint – Sarah giving her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham to speed up the process of producing an heir is one example. I can, however, speak to how we feel about waiting now in the 21st century. There was a time when a TV dinner would take

about 20 minutes to heat in the oven. Today we grow impatient waiting one minute to heat our food in a microwave.

If we grow so impatient about heating leftovers, how impatient can we become while waiting for God to act. Let's face it, his timetable is vastly different than ours. Rather than wait on the Lord as the Bible so often advises, we choose to run ahead on our own and miss out on what God had in store for us. Not only that but we can become angry and distrustful toward God in the process.

Or we can choose to wait. As John Piper, founder of the Desiring God website, writes, "Waiting on the Lord is the opposite of running ahead of the Lord, and it's the opposite of bailing out on the Lord. It's staying at your appointed place while he says *stay*, or it's going at his appointed pace while he says *go*. It's not impetuous, and it's not despairing."

In today's story we find two elderly people who have waited, have stayed in place, their entire lives to see the Lord's Messiah. While waiting they have both kept busy in the Temple. Simeon considered a prophet as the "Holy Spirit rested upon him", was open and responsive to the leading of the Spirit. He actively responded to the message he received to go to the Temple on this particular day, at this particular time, to meet the Savior of the Nations. Anna for her part, was a constant presence in the Temple, likely praying for herself and others that God's Messiah would come soon.

Both of these people speak words saying the wait is over! Simeon says that not only is the wait of Israel over, but the wait of the Gentiles is over as well. Simeon makes clear that Jesus has come for all people and in so doing brings glory to God. Anna affirms what Simeon has to say, letting everyone who hears her know that the Redeemer has come.

But even after Jesus was born and the words of prophecy were spoken over him, the world waited another 30 years for him to begin his active ministry on earth. I'm sure there were those in Israel who would have liked very much to have seen the Messiah much sooner. But, again, that would have been running ahead of God. Perhaps that's why there are repeated admonitions in the Old Testament about waiting. Here are just three from the Psalms:

Psalm 27:14 (NIV2011)

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Psalm 33:20 (NIV2011)

²⁰ We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.

Psalm 130:5 (NIV2011)

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

We know, though, just how hard waiting can be. Waiting for medical test results. Waiting for the prodigal child to return. Waiting for a pandemic to run its course and for the world to return to normal. God knows our struggle and offers these words of assurance from Isaiah:

Isaiah 30:18 (NIV2011)

¹⁸ Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!

And in this season of Advent we are fully aware that God was gracious to us by sending his Son to usher in the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Yet still we wait. It has been 2,000 years since Jesus walked the earth and we continue to wait for the full in-breaking of that heavenly kingdom on earth.

What are we to do while we wait? The Bible has much to say about how we are to wait. We are to wait in expectation, to always be ready for Christ's return. We are to carry out his mission of reconciliation by caring for the least of these – orphans, widows, the sick, the imprisoned, the foreigner in our midst. We are to fulfill the instructions given to the disciples before Jesus ascended into heaven when he said:

Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV2011)

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. ...”

Each of us will wait in our own way, using the gifts given to us by God for his purpose. In the coming New Year, let each of us inquire of God

how he would have us wait as individuals and as the gathered people of his kingdom.

I close with these words from Paul's letter to Titus:

Titus 2:11-14 (NIV2011)

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

¹² It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,

¹³ while we *wait* for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

AMEN

Lynne McMullan Allebach

December 27, 2020 Hatfield Church of the Brethren