

What Time Is It? Time to Wait!

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
December 15 – 3rd Sunday of Advent

James 5: 7-10

In Revelation 22, the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, Jesus has returned. But curiously, he says to the faithful gathered before him, “Very soon now, I shall be with you again...I am...the bright star of the morning.” That is how the Bible ends: not like a mystery with the culprit revealed and the riddle solved; not like a symphony or a musical with a grand finale. It ends without really ending. It ends with anticipation. It ends with the faithful, who have waited so long and suffered so much, still waiting, with Jesus saying, “Very soon now, I shall be with you.” Is that all there is? Sixty-seven books and a few thousand years and then...more waiting? Who writes this stuff?

But, of course, that is also how our New Testament story begins – with waiting...waiting in the dark for the coming of the Light, waiting for the birth of the Promised One, waiting for the promise of peace and good will to be fulfilled. Every Advent of our lives...waiting. What time is it? It’s time to wait. And so James advises us, “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.” Still more waiting. And, speaking as a person who hates to wait, who often has the patience of a two-year-old on caffeine – too often, I fear, I’m like the man who prayed, “Dear God, give me patience...and give it right now!” Yes, for one like me, this is a challenging text – indeed a challenging season of the church year.

A story told by UCC minister, Elizabeth Myer Boulton: “Our guide assured us that it wasn’t very far, only about 15 minutes or so up the road...maybe 20. We were on our way to Bassin-Bleu, one of Haiti’s most magnificent waterfalls. The sight of it, we were told, would take our breath away. It was early in the morning. We filled up our water bottles, lathered up with sunscreen, topped it off with insect repellent, laced up our hiking boots and hit the trail.

“I settled into a good Haitian pace, which proved to be much faster than the sluggish American pace I was used to. But after about an hour of hiking, I asked our guide as politely as I could, ‘Are we getting close? Are we almost there?’ He assured me that the falls were very close now, only about 15 minutes up the mountain...maybe 20.

Two hours later, with no waterfall in sight, my lungs were burning, my feet were blistered, my water bottle was bone dry. I couldn’t go any further, even though our guide insisted that we were almost there, only about 15 minutes more. I sat down with my back against a tree, totally spent. That’s when I saw the woman who had been walking some distance behind us, with a basket of 20 or 30 pounds of oranges balanced carefully on her head. She smiled when she saw me, gracefully swung the basket down into her arms and sat down. Then she cut one of her oranges in two, handed me half, and said, ‘We have a saying in Haiti: After mountains, more mountains.’”

Certainly the Haitian people have experienced the truth of those words. The life expectancy of a Haitian man is 55. Haitian women are 60 times more at risk of dying in childbirth than American women. Three out of every 50 babies born in Haiti die before taking their first steps. After mountains, more mountains: after hunger, more hunger; after sickness, more sickness; after poverty, more poverty.

And as we have been talking about during these Advent Sundays, that can also be the experience of our Advent waiting...so many mountains, after so many mountains – mountains of struggle and pain, of anxiety and despair, of suffering and sadness. I get frustrated if my computer takes more than a few seconds to open my e-mail. Now I am being asked to wait and wait and wait during Advent, to be patient, yet on the surface of things, after all this waiting, so little seems to have changed. Always, it seems, more mountains. What’s the point? Is there something different, something special, about our Advent waiting?

Back to Boulton’s story about her search for the waterfall: “After I finished my orange, I got back on my feet and I was refreshed. Fifteen minutes more, I said to myself. Soon I heard the whisper of running water in the distance. I couldn’t see Bassin-Bleu yet, but I could hear it and it sounded like justice rolling down. It sounded like God had created a world. I could make out the squeals of young children learning how to walk, the warm tones of women gossiping while washing their laundry, and the proud arguments of old men debating who was the oldest.”

She concludes, “We don’t know how far away we are from that new world, but we are called to live and to pray and to preach as if it were right around the corner...and to keep on walking. After

mountains and more mountains, we will come up over a rise and catch sight of that mighty waterfall, and it will take our breath away.” That, I would submit, is what our Advent waiting is all about.

This isn't waiting in line at the post office or at an endless red light or in a cashier's line at the mall. That kind of waiting is passive, really just killing time. But Advent waiting, that is something altogether different. We wait in hope for something that is not seen, yearning for it with a longing that is beyond words. We find ourselves somewhere between the now and the not yet. We wait in hope and patience, we wait in the faith that all time, all history, all events are encompassed within the care of a God whose loving intention for all the world will not be thwarted. We wait with a kind of pregnancy of possibility for what the future holds for us and the world that God is holding and shaping. One pastor speaks of these days as a time of “active waiting.” In his words, “There is a whole lot of waiting going on in the Bible, but it is a different kind of waiting. There's an active quality to the waiting. It is an act of faith in the God who is Lord of time and history. And this active waiting changes people. Those who wait for healing tend to become healers. Those who wait for justice and peace tend to become peacemakers and justice seekers. And as we work for what we wait for, we get enough glimpses of God's new future to give us the gift of hope.”

As we work for what we wait for, we are changed. I think back to Nelson Mandela in prison all those years. He must have wondered if he would ever be free. Yet, even as he waited for justice, he pursued justice. Even as he looked forward to a time of forgiveness and reconciliation, he practiced forgiveness and reconciliation. He worked for what he waited for, and that gave him hope to continue. And after that last mountain, there it was...the waterfall. When the time of freedom incredibly, unbelievably, came, he was ready. The waiting, the faithful, hopeful waiting, had prepared him.

If all we see around us is all there will ever be, just the same old same old, then why bother to wait? Nothing will ever change. But, if we wait, like Mandela, like so many who have gone before us in the faith, if we wait in hope and anticipation, we are open to a new future, a new world. In fact the power of that new future is already at work in us. In our waiting we place ourselves in God's hands, we give God room to work, we make ourselves available to do what God is planning and, in the process, we are changed. The kingdom comes just that much closer. And we discover that we already possess a measure of that for which we wait.

One last example of the power of our Advent waiting. Joanna Adams, Presbyterian pastor, writes, “My grandfather worked for justice and once risked his life for a black friend in the segregated South. He had been dead for decades when the civil rights laws were finally passed, but when he was on this earth, he made sure his heart was strong and did what he could to see that little shoots of hope grew in the rocky, red clay southern soil of his time. His memory genuinely inspires me and teaches me that there really is a kingdom coming in which all God's people are worthy of respect.”

Centuries have passed since James urged the Christians of his time to be patient. And still that promised end of days has not come. But this season of Advent is the time when the church chooses to keep alive the hope that God is not finished, either with creation or with human history or with us. The fact that we are still waiting means that we have not given up hope – the hope that God is indeed present and active in our lives and in the life of the world, always working to bring about the purposes that God intends; the hope that we stand an excellent chance of seeing Jesus, that bright morning star, in the pre-dawn pulse of promise for those who remain awake and waiting.

Ann Weem's prayer:

*It is not over, this birthing.
There are always newer skies into which
God can throw stars.
When we begin to think
that we can predict the Advent of God
that we can box the Christ in a stable in Bethlehem
that's just the time that God will be born
in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.
Those who wait for God
Watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
Listening, always listening,
For Angel words.*