



SAINT LUKE'S

“WAITING”
ADVENT 3A

ISAIAH 35:1-10
PSALM 146:4-9
JAMES 5:7-10
MATTHEW 11:2-11

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
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John the Baptist is the first to say *This is the Messiah, the Lamb of God.*¹ John baptizes Jesus and proclaims Jesus as the anointed. John is now in prison and in doubt. *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* If even John the Baptist is confused by Jesus, something is not going as expected. What is John looking for? John has been preaching about a Messiah who will be a fierce, apocalyptic axe to the root of the tree.² Jesus is fulfilling *some* of the expectations of John's Messiah but not all. Jesus is not advocating an overthrow of the Roman occupation, or civic resistance. John and his disciples are wondering. ("Oh, but we thought the Messiah would..."; "Oh, but we were expecting someone who...") They are waiting for someone more undeniable, obvious, spectacular.

Jesus responds: *Tell John what you see.* The sick are healed, hope is given to the poor. Jesus says - this is the real evidence of God at work: healing and hope. Jesus doesn't start at the top, getting meetings with the most important people he can get access to. Instead, Jesus goes straight to ordinary people in need. God can part the Red Sea but God doesn't do it often. God's kingdom is the tiny mustard seed, the treasure buried in an ordinary field. This is at the

¹ John 1:29ff

² Mt. 3:7-10, 11-12; Luke 3:7-9, 16-18

heart of what Jesus wants to show us about God. The spectacular thing is the choice of the *unspectacular*: the ordinary family, the ordinary town, the one-on-one healings. The extraordinary thing is God's choice for the ordinary. God enters human experience in every way we can imagine.

This season of Advent has many facets as we prepare for Jesus' birth and his Second Coming in glory. One of them – often understated – is the universal human experience of *waiting*. In the second lesson today, the Letter of James urges patience. *Strengthen your hearts; take the example of the prophets in their suffering and patience*. The word Patience is related to the same root as Passion,³ which is related to Suffering. A hospital patient is someone who is acted upon, who is treated, who becomes the object of medical decisions carried out by others. Being in hospital is an intense experience of waiting, of patience and suffering. Waiting is an often painful mix of caring, longing, not knowing, fear, hope, suffering, praying and powerlessness.

How do we think about waiting? We live in a time when waiting is almost intolerable to us. As a culture, we hate to wait and boil over with frustration at delay.

³ Gr. *Pascho*, via Latin: *pascha*, *paschal*, *suffer*: the essence of these words is to be acted upon

The evidence is everywhere. Same day delivery, road rage, instant gratification, Instagram, grab and go. Even email has become too cumbersome so we text and twitter instead.

Think about times when you have been acted upon by forces you cannot control; when we lose our job, or fail to land a position we applied for; when we are treated unfairly, when we are shamed, when we are frustrated by circumstances we cannot change, when we feel insignificant, vulnerable, exposed, sidelined, trapped or powerless, when we receive bad health news, or loved ones fall ill. All these experiences and many more take us out of the driving seat of our own lives. We are forced into a passive role rather than an active one. We don't have to be a headline victim of injustice or violence to know these feelings. Life hands this to all of us in some way eventually: waiting. Only God can snap God's fingers and instantly transform circumstances. Yet in Jesus' birth and later in his Passion and death, God chooses not to. God enters fully into our experience of being at the mercy of powerful forces and politics, of being handed over to the decisions of people who don't know us at all and couldn't care less.

Waiting is at the heart of what God does.⁴ (There is a profound and fuller exploration of this theme in WH Vanstone's *The Stature of Waiting* which I commend to you wholeheartedly.) We think of God as the all-powerful, the initiator, the prime mover, and so God is. Yet part of God's passion is this submission to being acted upon by us. In Jesus, God steps back from control. In Jesus, God is born powerless and God will die powerless. What God is always waiting for - the one thing God asks from God's beloved Creation - is a return of love. God is always waiting for a response of love back to God and outwards towards our neighbor.

Because waiting is what God does, waiting is not meaningless. Waiting is not a gap or aberration or mistake in our lives, nor is it something we are meant to fix by sheer force of will or technological efficiency. When *we* wait, it is full of God's image in us. The experience of waiting is at the heart of God's image in us. When we understand our experience this way, it elevates and dignifies our human life. It reframes our sufferings and frustrations and longings so that we think of them quite differently. The ordinary becomes extraordinary.

⁴ *The Stature of Waiting* by WH Vanstone. Vanstone follows Paul Tillich's theological method of correlation, where human experience and the doctrine of God mutually illuminate each other.

So next time we are waiting for someone we love, longing for something, hoping, frustrated by how long it is taking, when we are exhausted in our waiting, when we are devastated and disappointed after a long wait - think of God. God has been there in Jesus and God still waits in eternal Advent hope that each of us - his beloved - will respond with a return of love.

AMEN

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