



Sunday, December 6, 2020

## While You Are Waiting

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*Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a*

The subject of this passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter has to do with end times, about God's timing and our timing. We have lived days and years that are like what Peter says here: A day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

So, here is a question: Are you a patient person?

Are you good at waiting? Do you become impatient when the red light is too long, when the doctor is not on time for your appointment, when time hangs heavy on your hands? You are not alone. I confess that I do not like to wait, but I have gotten better at it than I used to be. In former days, unless I had someone with me to talk with, or unless I had a book to read, I became impatient much sooner than I do now. I attribute it to one thing, and it is not a spiritual thing. But it may have a spiritual application. Have you guessed what it is?

If you said, "You look at your smart phone," you are correct. When I am in line at the post office, for instance, instead of tapping my foot or getting fussy, I get out my phone, check the email, and so forth. I find that the time passes more pleasantly, and it even seems to pass more quickly, until it is my turn.

Being occupied is one thing to do when we are waiting. As Henry Drummond says: *"In the meantime, do the next thing, for doing God's will in small things is the best preparation for knowing it in the great things."*

And there is another way to wait, in which you put your mind in a calm and meditative place, and you open yourself to what might come your way. Both are valid ways of waiting. Spiritually speaking, we may get more from one or from the other. But both are better than getting worked up about waiting. Let us consider each, in turn.

First, keep busy but not distracted. It happened not far away, at our sister Presbyterian church over in Fox Chapel, back when I served there. We were well into the worship service; the senior pastor had climbed into the pulpit, and launched into his sermon. It was a message worth hearing. But no one was paying attention. In fact, as he gazed out on the gathered congregation, they were uncharacteristically distracted. He saw them look first to the right, and then, a moment later, look to the left — and so forth, repeatedly. It was like watching fans in the stands at a tennis match. Finally, the preacher looked over to me, seated as I was on the opposite side of the chancel, and said, "I seem to have lost them ... ."

And I replied, "That's because there's a chipmunk running back and forth on the chancel steps!"

Sometimes our lives are like that. We have all we need from God, in the way of information and inspiration, but we are distracted by small matters that demand our attention, like chipmunks in the chancel. They scamper to and fro in our minds — keeping us preoccupied in our waking hours, and restless throughout the long night. Back and forth, they go, over and over again. This works against God's plan for us.

God does not want to lose us. God calls us to look above such distractions, so that we can see God's wonders beyond them. The busy world has much that would send us to the left, or to the right, of the way of Jesus Christ. While you are waiting, keep busy but not distracted.

While we are waiting, we also have the ability to put our minds in a calm and meditative place, in order to open our lives to what God brings our way. Down through the centuries of church history, believers have called this "Practicing the Presence of God." François Malaval (1627-1719), the French poet and religious writer, who was blind from early childhood, published many devotional works. Here is an observation from him, which I find helpful:

*"Think of God often ... and such thoughts will not disturb or deflect you. They will, rather, accompany you, go before you, follow you, and generally awaken you. If someone ordered you to make twenty-five or thirty respirations every minute, you would repulse such a suggestion; you would think it would impede all your actions. Yet you breathe every moment without noticing it, and you do not cease to act with as much liberty as if nothing were going on in you."*

While we are waiting, we have this invitation to focus on God. As we do this more and more, our focus becomes as natural and as beneficial as breathing in and breathing out.

You will recall there is a concept called the Breath Prayer, which is taking a very brief passage of Scripture and making it your own as an ongoing resting thought — a simple prayer that can be spoken aloud or inwardly in the course of a single breath. For example, this: *"Lead me, O Lord in Your paths, and I will walk in Your truth."* Praying like this repeatedly, while we are waiting, will put our minds in a calm and meditative place.

Long before I had a driver's license, my grandmother (who was an excellent driver) would often take me places — so often, that I came to recognize the challenge of waiting at one particular Pittsburgh intersection. You may have had to wait there, too. I call it "the longest traffic light in town." At that intersection, the drivers could, if they wished, make their waiting time shorter. But here's the secret: It did not happen on its own. You had to drive over one of those hidden plates in the road, to trigger the traffic light, so that the light would turn green more quickly. There were way too many drivers who were one car ahead of my grandma at the light, who did not drive over that plate. So there everyone would sit, much longer than necessary. It may not have been the longest traffic light in town, but it certainly felt that way.

Such things bring out one's ability to be patient or not. And they are small indeed compared with the fulfillment of God's plan as we find it in our lesson from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter. So much of what we read there has an overwhelming and even frightening tone. So I am grateful that Peter says: *"You look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."* And I am also grateful that he says: *"We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells."* Most of all, I appreciate that there is not a lot for me to do in order to hasten that time, except what he says in summary about being patient while we are waiting.

Keep his words in mind, in this Advent season of waiting, because we are waiting for pure goodness and love, in the person of Jesus Christ. As Peter writes: *"Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation"*. Amen.