

When I was 12, I had a Shaquille O'Neal rookie card. It was my most prized possession. I even put it in one of those plastic sleeves to prevent the corners from being bent, fingerprints smudged. Like the toy race cars and micro-machines of years past, I slept with this card next to my pillow. Perhaps I thought that by the laws of proximity I would instantly grow a foot or two and become a better basketball player? Whatever my reasons, I loved Shaq, and I cherished that card.

So one summer day at the local swimming pool where my family belonged, my grandfather saw me parading around with my beloved card and asked if he could see it. Reluctantly, I agreed to hand it over for his inspection. And then he asked me something which gave me a chill. He proposed that he could take the card for a week, apparently, to put it behind glass for me. UV protection or something or other. I can't really remember. All I heard was that I would be deprived of my possession, my friend, for a whole week (oh, how glacially time moves when you're young! Weeks are like months, years like decades). But he was grandpa. And so, even though I was hesitant, I agreed to his request and promised to bring it to him the day after.

So the next day came and there by the snack-stand my grandfather happily greeted me and asked for the card – visibly thrilled to be doing something special, and lasting, for his grandson. And I... quickly made up some sorry excuse and bought myself another day. Another night.

The next day came and again there by the snack-stand he happily stood... and there, once again, I made up some lame excuse and bought myself another day. Another night.

Two months passed, and yet, there he was still waiting on me. Until, that is, the day I finally erupted: *I don't want you to have my card, Grandpa. I don't trust you with it. You'll ruin it!*

Now, my grandfather's days were as easily lost as they were won, and a single moment could swing the pendulum either way. My grandfather was diagnosed as Bi-Polar, and often he went off his meds and into a depressive mania. And so after months of waiting on my promise, and after that selfish punitive tirade, he went into a manic state and ceased to speak to me -- his grandson. Now even back then I wasn't vain enough to think that I alone triggered his descent, but nonetheless, it was apparent that the end of our time together, as we knew it, was upon us. Even after he went back on his meds and forgave me (which I'm not sure I deserved), for months there was tension between us, a lack of trust perhaps but definitely a lack of communication. And so for that final year of his life, which culminated in a stroke, we were never really the same. And to this day, I am convinced that there by that snack-stand, I forever altered my relationship with my grandfather.

Rev. Dr. Hugh Rayment-Pickard writes: "Children instinctively know what philosophers have worked out more laboriously: promises are essential to human relationships. Promises are ethical glue, as John Locke argued, holding society together with bonds of trust. In marriage, faith or friendship, the keeping of promises is not only socially useful: it is a sacred duty of love. It is one of the attributes of God that God keeps God's promises. So the breaking of promises is in a different category from other transgressions: a broken promise is a betrayal of trust and love. And the damage caused by such betrayals can be almost impossible to repair."

How many times, do you imagine, have you not made good on a promise? In your entire life, that is. 50? 123? 1,000? 0? The other day I saw a quote on Pinterest, *consequently where I go shopping for all of my*

wisdom, that said, “Never trust a person that has let you down more than 2 times.” TWO times!? My marriage is in shambles. Are we really to be written off after just two failed promises?

Moreover, how long should we expect another to wait on a promise before it ought to be considered broken? A day? A week? A minute? A lifetime? For all of the husbands here today, let’s agree on a week, okay? A week seems like a nice balance. A day is too quick, and I sincerely doubt many of us would wait an entire lifetime for a promise to be kept. After all, we as a society have trouble waiting just milliseconds for a webpage to load. I once read a New York Times article a couple of years back where it demonstrated that if a Google search delayed its processing by 400 milliseconds — literally the blink of an eye — it proved too long a wait and caused people to search for their information elsewhere.¹ The blink of an eye!

We as a culture hate waiting. We fire coaches after one season. [Or in Chip’s case, it will be two.] We trample each other on Black Friday in search of a lousy deal on old technology. We grow despondent when Amazon hasn’t delivered our package the very next day. And we complain all night to our spouse when Verizon’s On Demand feature still hasn’t uploaded our show for our immediate viewing (me!). Waiting then has become one of our strongest adversaries as virtually all of us, especially we of a younger age, have forgotten (of if you’re really young, were never even taught) how to sit still. To embrace the quiet. To appreciate the wait. To chase after the slowness in life. And what virtues all of those are in our ever out-of-control, over-programmed, fast, busy lives.

A simple reordering of our Old Testament text reads: “The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made, restoring the fortunes of the land as at first, and Jerusalem will live in safety.”

Now, far be it from me to tell you that “Jerusalem” and “safety” aren’t always synonymous. Nor have the fortunes of that promised-land been restored to as at first. And lest we forget, this was a vow made by God in Jeremiah, oh, only about 2,600 years ago. So... if we all agreed just moments ago that a single week was the benchmark of time for a promise to be honored before it’s considered broken, do we now have to consider God a liar? An oath-breaker? If we can’t wait 400 milliseconds for a webpage to open, how then are we to be expected to wait 200+ lifetimes -- 2,000+ years -- for God’s promises to be fulfilled?

One of the many attempts to offer comfort at this bristling question is to say, well, God’s time works differently than our own. That we should not think of God as being slow as we consider slowness... But to many, this attempt has proved to be nothing more than just some pretty words wrapped in an elegant excuse. I had a friend, Justin, in the first year of seminary who decided to leave Princeton and consequently the church because he was tired of waiting on this Divine promise. Unable to reconcile the evils of the world, especially in the more forgotten corners that we (and to him, God) turn a blind eye to... where girls are genitally mutilated; where kids are kidnapped and sold as sex slaves; where third-world villages are pillaged and burned, their women raped; where U.S. drone strikes amputate civilians; and Palestinians are trampled by Israeli tanks, while vests laced with bombs explode in Jerusalem... he simply found it to be too much for him to endure and waiting another 1,000 years, let alone another month, was just too long a time and so he give it all up.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/technology/impatient-web-users-flee-slow-loading-sites.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1

Call him weak and perhaps simple, but honestly, his line of questioning, his anger and his dismay, were sentiments that kept me up at night. Like Jacob, wrestling with God in Genesis. And for a while there, I thought my friend's conjectures would fuel my doubts so far as to convince me to leave as well. But, and I always came back to this line of thinking (which kept me around, obviously)... if you buy into Creationism, or at least accept that somewhere, in some fashion, God existed at the beginning of all things, and if you believe Science that it took 9.3 billion years after the Big Bang for the Earth to form; and if you accept that humanity only began to take shape 200,000 years ago leaving about 4.4 billion years of this world's existence without us in it, then boy oh boy, that is a whole lot of years that God spent waiting around in the cosmic heavens, allowing things down here to sssssslowly develop and take form after that initial spark. Perhaps then, I would think on those restless nights, 2nd Peter was right all along, asserting that "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day." And perhaps this is why God's promises seemingly, sometimes, take forever to be honored.

So, closing the thread by doing simple math: if Jeremiah's promise from 2,600 years ago is only the equivalent of like a little over 2 divine days, then really, that's like no time at all. We're still well under our agreed-upon single-week threshold for a promise to be honored. And thus, the same would prove true for the apparent delay in Christ's coming back to this world, which, again if we are to trust 2nd Peter, is also only like 2 total days in God's life (2000 years since Christ's death/1000=2).

Speaking then of Christ's return, our New Testament text talks of an age of signs, when the disciples are to decode the events happening around them, and in doing so, prepare themselves for the return of the Lord. And for generations, we and our ancestors have done precisely that. We have read the signs and have made grave interpretations. During the Holocaust, it was endlessly parroted that, surely the time is now, the end is nigh and Christ's return is near. It didn't happen. Likewise, both parishioners and preachers today have looked towards the ceaseless conflict in the Middle East and the impending refugee *crisis* (*sarcasm*) and have interpreted both as events signaling the end-times. It ain't happening. Really. Enough with the end-times. Let books and television deal with it.

I mean, if Christ is going to return imminently and if I'm proven wrong... marvelous. But really, why would we ever want to root for that, for some sort of cataclysmic holy war? Do we really want God's creation, indeed this very life, to end, and in such chaos? No matter its tribulations, this God-given life is a miracle. A gift. And I have a kid on the way. And you, I'm sure, have future grandkids in the pipelines. There are marriages, graduations, and promotions to look forward to. More, *The Leftovers* is still in production on HBO. Additionally, we haven't yet found life on other planets and the Eagles still haven't won a Super Bowl. And quite frankly, the stark reality is that Jesus' own disciples, and indeed the authors of Luke and Matthew where we get these apocalyptic readings, were convinced that Jesus was going to return in their own lifetimes. And it didn't happen. There's really then no way we, who are so far removed from Galilee can ever know or even try to guess at when the end-times will be. So to try claim otherwise is just wasting time, breath, and paper. And making people scared for no reason.

To live in a state of high-alert, in paralyzing fear of Christ's return is both wasteful and not at all how it was designed to be. We have been destined to be free, and in that freedom we are called to love and serve God. Well, we can't love and serve God if we're no longer here. And, if going by mere observation, it is really hard to freely love and serve God, as well as God's people, when we're either afraid of our own judgment, or worse fear-mongering about the judgment to be meted upon others.

So in this Advent season where the world beckons us to worship the gods on Madison Avenue, and outspoken voices try to scare us into getting our wills in order, how about we make a different promise? How about we promise to try to be more patient? With each other and with God. How about we not only keep our promises to each other, but also possess more grace when other's promises appear to be broken? And how about we promise to be shaken from our rhythm (to borrow my friend Margaret's sermon title for today) and re-examine what really matters in our lives. How about we promise to honor our own promises, namely the vows we have made here, in this very church. To know who you are and whose you are. To live and to serve the one true God, who lives and reigns above all others, yes, even the earthly gods of tournaments, recitals and sleep.

And how about we add just one more, and agree to trust in the promise of the gospel, the good news: that unlike our mortal capabilities God is able to wait a lifetime on us. And that through the scandalous, humbling event of the Incarnation -- Christ being born unto an insignificant town called Nazareth and in a small, smelly manger no less -- God can understand our humanity and even forgives us for it, and loves us still without condition and with such great mercy and will do so until the real end of all time.

Amen.