

Those Who Wait Upon the Lord  
Isaiah 40:21-31  
Mark 1:29-39

“...but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

In Bible Study on Wednesday morning, we were vaguely talking about what it meant to wait upon the Lord when Harry Spaeth mentioned Samuel Beckett’s play, “Waiting for Godot” and then suggested I go to Quintessence Theater in Mt. Airy where it was opening that very night. I did! Even if you do not see the play, you can visit the theater’s website where the two main characters reflect on the substance of Beckett’s play whose original title was simply “Waiting.” “We start waiting at such an early age,” Frank X begins, the actor who plays Estragon, “and there’s no day, no moment in our lives when we’re not waiting for something. I think Beckett saw that and then decided to make his play about waiting.” “Not about what goes on while we’re waiting,” Johnnie Hobbs, Vladimir in the play, adds, “but about the actual process of waiting and what it does to you.” Some have said *Waiting for Godot* is a play about nothing that repeats itself twice—sort of a precursor to *Seinfeld*. That is why, on one hand, watching these two vaudevillian-like actors wait for the endlessly promised arrival of Godot is like watching paint dry. Yet, on the other hand, it is like watching our lives as we pass the time in anticipation of the event or person always about to arrive that we hope will make sense of our waiting.

A common word in religion for the event or person that arrives to make sense of our waiting is revelation. In this season, another word we use for this event or person is epiphany: a light that illumines the darkness from out of the future, a disclosure that dispels the mystery to give us just enough to go on. Without revelation, you and I hold in our heads the basic facts of our lives—the things that happen and when, the people we meet and how. But the meaning of those facts remains hidden until they are seen in the light of some epiphany that illumines the plot, ordering these once disparate facts into a life that has a purpose. The characters in *Waiting for Godot* are waiting for that moment or experience or event, waiting for the appearance of Godot. Of his characters, Beckett says, “I know no more about the characters than what they say, what they do, and what happens to them.” They are a set of disparate facts, characters waiting, Beckett says, “in a curious suspension of hope and despair for a salvation that never comes.” And of Godot he says, “I do not know who Godot is. I do not even know if he exists.” “Let’s go,” Estragon says. “We can’t,” says Vladimir. “Why not?” asks Estragon. “We’re waiting for Godot.” “Ah.”

Each of us can probably remember a time when life seemed as though it were just one damn thing after another, going nowhere in particular. Maybe you have a job but it is just a place-holder until you find the one needful thing that you know you must do with your life. Or maybe the initial rush of Match.com has settled into a pointless search for someone who does not seem to exist, but still you wait. Or perhaps in the middle of your life you have hit a wall of doubt about how you should spend the rest of your life and with whom. When will you know and how? Or maybe you have been waiting since 1980 for the Eagles to beat the Patriots in the Super Bowl! Or you joke about facing the last chapters of your life in God’s waiting room, knowing that the final revelatory event will be your own death. Writing in Paris about the same time that Beckett was writing *Godot*, a character in Peter Matthiessen’s novel *Partisans*, laments: “To wait, to wait, as it now seemed to him he had waited all his life: for graduation from school, for enlistment in the Army, for combat that never came, for the war to end, for college to end, for promotion in two jobs he did not want, for a love that did not exist—waiting for a *raison d’être* which never arrived because he would not recognize it.”

Both readings this morning have to do with a people who are waiting for that revelatory moment, that *raison d’être*. The prophet Isaiah was living with and addressing God’s people in Babylon. It would be fifty years before their exile would come to an end, fifty years of growing up, getting married, having babies, holding jobs, all the while waiting for God to appear and lead them home. But as they waited, they began to

doubt that God was able to save them, began to question whether God was even interested in saving them. So Isaiah begins his career as a prophet both comforting them as they walk in darkness and convincing them that epiphanies (flashes of light in the darkness) were all around them. But to see and recognize light in the darkness, their waiting could not be the waiting of those who simply pass the time. Rather because of what they had known, what they had heard, what they had been told from the beginning, their waiting would be marked by confident expectation.

Here is the first thing to remember about those who wait upon the Lord when everything about them is dark, the future unknown: we wait as characters in a story whose plot is in the hand of the God who does not faint or grow weary, whose understanding is unsearchable. As Israel waited, they told the story. "By the rivers of Babylon," the psalmist writes, "there we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion," remembered the exodus, the law, the land, the stories that told them who they were and to whom they belonged.

Is that not what we do every week when we gather in this sanctuary? Each of us has spent the week waiting for the random pieces of our *personal* lives to cohere. But often and like the Israelites, we are also waiting for the disparate pieces of our *common* life to cohere. And while we wait we forget what we have known, what has been told to us from the beginning because we live as exiles in a land whose worship of other gods or no god at all has made us forgetful. It is as though our lives were a 500 piece jigsaw puzzle whose box top is missing! So a few of us gather on Wednesday morning and a few more of us gather on Sunday morning to rehearse the plot again and again, waiting in its words and with its characters for a revelation: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Transfiguration, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time, Christ the King. We rehearse the plot when waiting becomes tedious, but especially "When we reach our limits," theologian John Shea writes, "when our ordered worlds collapse, when we cannot enact our moral ideals, when we are disenchanted, we often enter into the awareness of Mystery...Our dwelling within Mystery is both menacing and promising, a relationship of exceeding darkness and undeserved light. In this situation with this awareness, we do a distinctively human thing. We gather together and tell stories of God to calm our terror and hold our hope on high."

Such was the situation of the characters who populated the little town of Capernaum. Descendants of the exiles, they had been waiting for generations, hoping that the revelatory moment or experience or event or person promised long ago by God would appear. Mark believed that he had, believed that in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the event and the person who was the clue to the meaning and purpose of human history had begun the day by teaching in the synagogue, then entered the house of Simon and cured the fever of his mother-in-law, and finally, that evening, had opened the door to receive the sick and the possessed whose lives were in pieces until, in Jesus, God's reign had finally come near. Suddenly it was as though those who had been walking aimlessly in the pitch dark had been joined by one who came alongside of them as light, illumining the world for a moment such that they saw: they saw the lame made to walk, the lepers cleansed, the demons vanquished, the lost found, their broken human existence made whole.

Therefore the second thing to remember about those who wait upon the Lord is that our waiting has come to an end in him. Like the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, you and I likely will not see Him face to face until we taste of death. We may never experience a miracle or be certain that our prayers have been answered in the affirmative. Still, this One who came to Simon and Andrew has come alongside of you; this One who did not hesitate to call James and John has called you; this One who spoke with authority to the congregation in Capernaum speaks even and often to this congregation; this One who wrestles with unclean spirits wrestles endlessly with the darkness that has hold of you; and this One who assumed our human condition for a season has taken the pieces of our lives as his own and fit them into the story of God's renovation of the world. For in him, the love that we have known, that we have heard, that has been told to us from the beginning has appeared in time as the clue to the meaning and purpose of our lives and as the event that illumines all of human history. From this day forward, to wait on him is simply to follow him. Those who do will run and not be weary, will walk and not faint. Thanks be to God!