

Waiting

Matthew 11: 2-6

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Our lives are inevitably shaped by those for whom we wait. *You'd better not shout; you'd better not cry; you'd better not pout; I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.* Our lives are inevitably shaped by those for whom we wait. *Some day he'll come along, the man I love. And he'll be big and strong, the man I love. And when he comes my way, I'll do my best to make him stay—the man I love.* Our lives are inevitably shaped by those for whom we wait. Isaiah, in our Old Testament lesson, had a vision of one who was to come to redeem the world and to usher in God's kingdom on earth. It was the single vision that fashioned Isaiah's life, shaped by the one for whom he waited.

My wife Janie's grandfather—Presbyterian preacher of the old school—when he became quite elderly and blind, used to bore the family mercilessly with his incessant talk of looking forward to heaven—during family prayers, pleading with the Lord to take him home—in conversation at the dinner table, talking of how he couldn't wait to meet Jesus face to face. Now, most of us would not want to put it quite that way. Nonetheless, there is an essential eschatological quality in our Christian faith. We may not be certain of every detail (or all agree even), but we do live in anticipation of a future not to be feared, when God's purposes will be fulfilled. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered the human heart, all that God has prepared for those who trust in God." While, in the meantime, we wait. Only even as we wait, the quality and the character of our lives are shaped by the one for whom we wait.

Theologian Paul Tillich said, "Although waiting is not having, it is also having. The fact that we wait for something shows that in some way we already possess it." Waiting, says Tillich, "anticipates that which is not yet real. If we wait and hope in patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us. Those who wait, in an ultimate sense, are not that far from that for which they wait."¹ Theologians like to talk of an "interim ethic," by which they mean a way of behaving in the interim—between the time when Christ was here and time when he comes again—a time, for us, like now. You and I live in the interim. In fact, most of the New Testament is written from that perspective, in the interim, waiting for the fulfillment of time.

St. Paul speaks of Christian life as "living on tiptoe," as we wait, in anticipation. After all, what is the Christian life, if not the modeling on the promises of the one for whom we wait? Indeed, both Old and New Testaments are peppered with vivid descriptions and images—sometimes terrifying—of that final day when the Lord shall return—"with vengeance," as Isaiah puts it—while other images portray the future in terms of gladness and divine fulfillment—"the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom." And, "The people shall see the glory of the Lord. The blind shall see; the deaf hear; the lame will leap like deer, and the speechless will sing for joy, as all sorrow and sighing shall flee away"—heavenly images. Again, in the New Testament Book of Revelation, John—old and exiled by now—foresees the finality of it all as a time when life will be so idyllic, there will no

longer be even a need for rules or laws—no Supreme Court—because people will all be kind and just. In fact, John says, there will be no holy temples in all God’s kingdom, no church in heaven—which means no preachers either, I suppose—because every act will be an act of worship, every deed done out of kindness, and all life will be praise because the law of God will be written upon our hearts.

I do not need to tell you, that day has not come. Shove your way through Times Square on any Saturday night. God’s rule of love is hardly written yet on every human heart. Only, no one need go to Times Square to know God’s kingdom does not yet exist among us, or, for that matter, within our own selves. We live in the interim, which, as Auden reminds us, is always the most difficult time of all. The time being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all. There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, irregular verbs to learn, the time being to redeem—from insignificance. It really is the time being that gives us the most trouble, isn’t it? That period that stands between innocence and experience, between ignorance and wisdom, between doubt and faith. The time we spend in waiting—for the phone to ring, the plane to land, the letter to arrive, the check to come—waiting for—the grades to come in, for the lab report—waiting to see, to hear, to know—while the meantime is the most difficult. Apparently it was no less difficult a time for old John the Baptist, whom we read about in the second lesson.

The lesson last Sunday gave a portrait of John coming down out of the hills, arrogant and cocksure, for John had seen Jesus. John had spent time with Jesus. John had baptized Jesus. John had bought in, for John had been born again—and, I suspect from appearances, was being a little obnoxious about it—not uncommon among new converts. But all that was last week. This week, time has passed. John has been put in prison, probably because his preaching was construed as treasonous—and where he is probably well aware that he is sentenced to death—which has had a sobering effect on his cockiness. In fact, John is even beginning to have second thoughts about Jesus, wondering if maybe he had been too quick to judge, because even though John is in prison, he hears the news. He has heard about Jesus healing the sick, and preaching hope to the oppressed—forgiving the most heinous of sinners, and giving them a second chance, and a third, and even more. And all this is very confusing to John, for it is not what he expected at all.

Remember from last week, the Jesus that John started out preaching—and fully expected—was a kind of swashbuckling Savior who stormed across the countryside, sword in hand, meting out justice, toppling kings, replacing power in new partisan hands, separating the wheat from the chaff, and sending the unrighteous into ovens to burn like straw. The images in John’s mind of this coming Savior were harsh and violent—images of judgment, punishment, and repression for the unrighteous. The coming kingdom would be law and order—little place for grace—all images being challenged now by what he is hearing reported of Jesus’ peculiar activity—to the point that John smuggles a letter out of prison, asks Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”—because clearly, John is confused. Jesus is turning out not at all as he had expected. Truth is, Jesus rarely is what we first expect. So little wonder John is bewildered, and beginning to question his expectation, because expectations do have their way of shaping perceptions.

At Harvard, several years ago, there was conducted a very serious experiment

designed to test the power of expectation over perception. The test became known as “The Experiment of the Red Six of Spades,” and consisted of giving the person being tested a deck of cards, and instructing that person to thumb through it to see if there was anything unusual about it. Only the deck is rigged. The six of spades is red, instead of black. The experiment revealed, in most cases, a person would not recognize the irregularity. Because most everyone is familiar with a deck of cards, we expect all spades to be black; and although we see the red six of spades, our expectation overrides our perception. So that, in the case of the experiment, seeing is not believing. Literally, you don’t believe your eyes.

That is something of what was happening with John. John expected one kind of Savior. God had sent another, and John was having trouble believing his own eyes—and ears—which prompts the inquiry, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we be looking for another?”—implying, another who conforms more narrowly to my expectation. Jesus’ response is instructive, not only to John, but to us. Jesus says to the messenger, “Go back to John. Tell John what you see and hear. Those who are blind, receive their sight; the lame walk; the sick are healed; the dead raised up; the sinful forgiven; the poor helped; and the oppressed set free.” Tell John what you see. Tell John the kingdom that is to come—already breaking in, and for which the world waits—is a kingdom characterized by compassion, mercy, love, and justice for all. Go tell John what you see, and what he can expect.

What is the character of the kingdom for which we wait, you and I? What is it we expect—really expect out of Christmas—as we await the one who comes? Someone has observed that people tend to make out of life pretty much what they make out of Christmas. I think that is true, don’t you? Life tends to mean for us what Christmas means. So, if Christmas means little more than the annual midwinter solstice, a break from winter doldrums, bonus time, Christmas carnival time, a boost for the economy, entertainment for the children, and an increasing endorsement of American consumerism—if that is all we expect from Christmas—then life—once life returns to normal, returns to the meantime—life will probably amount to little more. If, however, Christmas is perceived as the radical entrance of one who literally wants to change the way the world thinks, operates, perceives reality—then life in the ensuing meantime is more likely to follow that pattern. Life for us will mean for us precisely what Christmas means.

No, the role of John, on this third Sunday of Advent, is to help us clarify our expectations—because our lives are inevitably shaped by those for whom we wait. Janie’s grandfather, the same grandfather who irritated the family so with his incessant chatter of wanting to join Jesus in heaven, had another equally irritating characteristic. It was his utter unconcern for the things of this world. The family gave him a gold watch for his birthday. He promptly gave it away to a beggar (said nobody needed a watch in heaven). They sent him money every month to supplement his pitiful little church pension. He sent it to the missionaries. They bought him a new felt hat for Christmas. First Sunday after Christmas, Granddaddy wore his new hat to church, then sat on it in the car all the way home from church. When reminded of how much the hat cost, and chastised for his carelessness, he simply shrugged and allowed as nobody would know the difference in a hundred years—besides, “Who needs a hat in heaven anyway?”—which really did not help much at the moment (though I think the family understands better now). Our behavior is inevitably shaped by the one for whom we

wait. For there is a sense, which is quite real, that even as we live out our days—in the interim—we already possess, and are possessed by, the one for whom we wait.

Karen, a student at Union Theological Seminary, was living and studying in New York City, while her newly-lawyered husband had gone to work for a law firm in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They saw each other only on the weekends. In homiletics class, Karen described what her Fridays were like when John came to Penn Station by train in time for a late supper. “I usually get up early on Friday to clean the apartment before coming up here to school,” she said, “Then, after classes, I make a kind of safari down Broadway. I stop for groceries, pick up a bottle of wine, stop at a favorite flower stall for fresh flowers; and when I get home, I have just enough time to get myself and supper ready. Then John comes.” Only Karen went on to add, “The funny thing about it is that from morning until he arrives, I have this strange feeling that he is already with me—not really—but really.”

In Advent, the one for whom we wait is already here, shaping and giving hope and substance to our lives—not really—but really.

Note

1. *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955). In the last sentence of the quote, I have updated Tillich’s language to make it more inclusive.