

Faith Mennonite Church
Lent 2013 "Ashamed No More"
February 24, 2013
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The Work of Waiting

Genesis 15:1-6, 12-15; Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35

“How much longer, God? Are we there yet?”

Whether or not we have addressed that question to God, we're all too familiar with the questions. As children, no matter how well our parents prepare us for a long car trip, we're ready to arrive at our new destination before we've left the home neighborhood. And, as parents behind the wheel, we move from compassionate to exasperated responses—and maybe even some bribing or threats—as the questions get asked over and over during the course of a journey.

Long car trips have gotten easier over the years. Technology now offers back seat entertainment centers and gps devices help one easily find museums and other fun way-stations during a long trip. But technology only goes so far in lightening the load of other kinds of waiting. Long car trips, even with unexpected detours and break downs are never as bewildering and fatiguing as the life situations that make us wait for months and even years: a chronic physical or mental health condition, the elusive perfect employment situation, conflict that doesn't find resolution, infertility, healing from an unexpected loss, being somewhere other than where one most desires to be, finding a life partner, or simply figuring out one's place in the world. This is hardly an exhaustive list; each of us know the things we've waited for and perhaps are waiting for now.

And these are just the personal things. For many of us the pain of waiting also comes from conditions that may not touch us personally but which trouble us all the same: grinding poverty that robs people of dignity and gives way to hopelessness and violence; inequality and racism; hungry children in our schools; human trafficking; inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict and war.

How long? we wonder. When will we get there? we ask. And as time passes we begin to doubt ourselves and doubt God. We might distance ourselves from other people, not wanting to see others enjoying the very thing we desire or we fear that someone will ask about our situation and we won't have an answer. And sometimes it might feel as if people distance themselves from us: who wants to be reminded of an ill that might befall them? Who wants to face a problem without an easy answer.

Thankfully the Bible doesn't distance itself from situations of waiting. In fact, the Bible is chock full of stories of people, from the ordinary to those we consider heroes of the faith like Abraham, who played the waiting game with God. The account from Genesis 15 that we read this morning has Abraham asking God when he and his wife will have a child, the heir on which hangs God's promise to Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation. Abraham and Sarah weren't getting any younger and chances of progeny were diminishing each day. God assures Abraham that they will indeed have a child and the record says that Abraham believed God. But several verses later we read that Abraham falls into a deep and terrifying darkness. And in the following chapters we learn the ups and downs of Abraham and Sarah's struggle to trust fully in God.

Wandering in search of a homeland was the overarching motif of Abraham's life and the generations that followed him. Jesus' life and ministry were also spent on the road. However, unlike Abraham who lived in hopes of a future promise, Jesus announced that the promise was fulfilled now. Yet Jesus also experienced a kind of waiting. While crowds of ordinary folks flocked to Jesus as he healed, taught, shared food and announced God's presence among them, he waited for the religious leaders to get on board. These were the folks that we might expect to be the first to catch on to God's ways in the world, yet they stood in opposition at almost every turn. And even in today's text when it appears that they are perhaps on Jesus's side, warning him of Herod's intentions, scripture scholars suggest that this was likely a ploy to get Jesus to move on.

As the opposition grew, Jesus seemed to understand that as he moved closer to Jerusalem, the center of religious power, rather than "coming home" or settling in a home land, he would instead face ultimate rejection and death. He neither runs from that reality nor fights against it. Instead, he laments. He speaks poetically of his desire to draw Jerusalem and its inhabitants under his wings like a mother hen. This is a picture of protection and nurture. It is also a picture of creative longing. In the creation account in Genesis we find God's spirit "brooding" over the chaos. From that brooding, God created the world. As Jesus laments, he longs to brood a new people into creative being. And he is prepared to give his very life to that process.

How do we join Jesus in this creative work of lament and brooding as we wait? Lament is not simply incessant complaining. Lament holds together a vision of that which we long for along with the reality of the not yet. It is found in many of the Psalms, the poetic songs of confident praise interwoven with the reality of doubt and despair. Psalm 27, which we recited in the call to worship and in several songs we have already sung, begins on the high note of proclamation: "The Lord is my light and my salvation." For eight verses this Psalm is pure trust and adoration. Then the reality of a painful moment of waiting moves in: "Do not hide your face from me...do not cast me off...do not forsake me..." Then, having entered the pain, the poet returns to a vision of the future: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." That vision gives confidence to continue the creative work of waiting: "Be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord."

Some years ago when my husband Gerald was writing his dissertation, he was prone to migraines. They weren't the severe form that would lay him low for an entire day or more, but they would interrupt his work. When he feared and fought them they only seemed to get worse. At some point it occurred to him to "go into the pain." At the first sign of a headache he would stop what he was doing, take some pain reliever and lie down and be present with the pain, not so much trying to hold it at bay, but moving inside of it. And, indeed, it lost its grip. Those words "go in to the pain" became a mantra for his thesis-writing project. He wrote those words on a post-it note that he placed at the top of his computer monitor. When he faced writer's block or inspiration waned, the reminder invited him to press on.

As we move into the pain of waiting, into a place of vulnerability, following Jesus toward Jerusalem, we move into God's brooding wings. In this process we may find God creating something quite different from what we have longed for, but we can be assured that it will be filled with "goodness... in the land of the living."

I invite you into a moment of silence to consider the one thing in your life at this moment for which you are waiting or the situation in the world that most burdens you. Imagine the loving wings of our mother hen God surrounding you or the situation you care deeply about. Speak your lament, then give thanks for the new creation that has already begun even if it is yet unseen.