

“A Waiting Prayer”

Introduction: Last summer, before we set out on our walk through a region in Great Britain called the Cotswolds, Rama and I received a long list of instructions from the tour company to help us complete our walk enjoyably and safely. Instruction ranged from what to wear, to where to find snacks each day, to specific places where the trail might be a bit hard to follow, to how to cross a road. This last one was the most interesting of the bunch because everyone knows how to cross a road, right? You simply look both ways. Well, yes, but, when in England, which way do you look first?! Because they drive on the left side of the road, you need to look right first, and then left. Because many of their walkers come from places where you drive on the right side of the road, the instructions read: “look right, look left, look right again!” They wanted to make sure we were aware that the first traffic we’d encounter would be coming from our right side. Yet, even with those instructions, I found that after 65 years of looking left first, it was so hard to do the opposite!

Looking both ways will be our theme for this advent season. Advent, which means “coming” or “arrival,” calls us to look back to celebrate the birth, or arrival of Jesus, and to look forward, with expectant waiting, for his return, his coming again. Broadly speaking, we could say that our life of faith is a life of waiting, as it is lived between these two comings of Jesus. We live in the present by looking ahead to what Jesus promises to do in the future, grounded in what he’s already done in the past.

Waiting, of course, isn’t always easy! Whether we’re waiting for a new job or a new relationship, whether we’re waiting for a child to be born or a grandparent to die, whether we’re waiting for Christmas vacation to begin or college to end, waiting can be difficult. We can get frustrated, impatient, and even mad at God, particularly in those instances and places where we’re baffled with how God seems to be running the world...or not! Waiting makes us realize we’re not in control. It forces us to deal with uncertainty. Above all, it perhaps moves us to consider our image of God – is God one with whom we have a relationship and who waits with us, or do we think of God as more of a vending machine who we turn to in order to get what we want with the minimum of waiting?

We begin to see this posture of waiting this morning in our texts from Isaiah and Mark. We’ll look closely at the Isaiah text which I offer to you as a waiting kind of prayer. It contains a plea for action, a call to remember, a statement of confession, and a declaration of hope. Let’s hear it together and then consider how it might help us in our own times of waiting. [READ]

I. A Plea for Action (Isa. 64:1-2)

A. The prayer begins with a plea for God to act: “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” It is the anguished lament of a people who have returned from decades of exile in Babylon only to discover that their temple was in ruins and their holy city reduced to rubble. Look at the pictures in the news as to how the current fighting in Israel has brought about destruction and maybe we can get something of a picture of what they experienced. Further, instead of being an important player on the world stage, Judah would find herself to be no more than a backwater territory within the vast Persian empire. They had no king, no army, no independence, and no easy time relating to those who had remained or been resettled in their homeland while they were away.

B. Understandably this plea is not a nice, “Now I lay me down to sleep” kind of prayer. It is an urgent call to action from a desperate people who have perhaps given up on nice, polite prayers. And that’s OK. Scroll through the Psalms, the prayer-book of the Bible, and you will quickly notice that it is filled with such anguished cries. God, it seems, gives us permission to cry out, to give voice to our lament, to call for him to “come down” and take action.

II. A Call to Remember (vv. 3-4)

A. As we cry out, what gives us the confidence that God can indeed act? Having entered their plea, this community continues to pray by remembering God’s actions in the past on their behalf:

For when you did awesome things . . . you came down . . . Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived no eye has seen any God besides you who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

God’s ancient people looked primarily to two “awesome things” in which to ground their hope and bolster their confidence. One was creation. They remembered that they were crying out to the God who had made the incredible heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them (cf. 121:1-2). When things go awry, what better place to turn than the manufacturer? The second “awesome thing” in which they grounded their hope was the Exodus, that time when God’s led his people out from Egypt, under the direction of Moses, parting the waters of the Red Sea so that the people could escape the hostile armies of Pharaoh as they fled their slavery. It was the defining moment for this people. It highlighted God’s care for them, and the place he had for them in the Promised Land, like nothing else could.

B. Throughout the OT, creation and the exodus are the events we often hear God’s people recalling as they grounded their hope and looked to God to act in their future. In this season of Advent we too gather together to remember, to remember the awesome story of how God opened the heavens and “came down” in the person of his Son. Well to remember as we do so is that the Son’s coming is with a different kind of power than we might expect. He did not come to blow people away with dramatic exploits. Instead, he entered our chaos not to be served but to serve. He came to walk with us and to call us to work with him in bringing healing to the brokenness around us. As the church father, Augustine, put it: “Without God we cannot. Without us, God will not.”

III. A Statement of Confession (vv. 5-7)

A. Of course, if God is going to come, we’d better be sure we’re ready! So this waiting prayer moves next to a time of confession:

You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. . . All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. . . No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you. . .

This is a brutally honest acknowledgment that before God, if they looked hard at themselves in the mirror, they were not unlike the enemies they wanted God to judge! They had continued to sin against God’s ways, which was the main reason they had lost their place in the Promised Land and had been carted off into exile in the first place. Such sin included a lack of care for the needy, the practice of idolatry, and the giving of their children over as sacrifices. It was horrible stuff.

B. As Isaiah put it just a few chapters earlier, one of the problems with sin is that it causes static in our relationship with God: “But your iniquities have separated you from your God your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (59:2). Confessing our sin, therefore, as part of the waiting process, helps to clear the way for God to act as we wait.

IV. A Declaration of Hope (vv. 8-9)

A. A plea for action, a call to remember, a statement of confession – this waiting prayer then ends with a declaration of hope: “Yet you, LORD, are our Father; we are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever.” This declaration rests in God’s character to heal and transform.

Illustration: I recall an advent workshop that we held a number of years ago when we had a craft for the kids that involved making Christmas tree ornaments by taking a piece of sandpaper that had been cut out to resemble a gingerbread man, and then dressing this figure with old scraps of cloth a few women in the church had dropped off. It was amazing what these kids came up with, using scissors, glue, and a little imagination! The transformation was remarkable.

So too, does God, our heavenly Father, the divine potter, take our rough spots and our filthy rags. He cleans and reshapes the rags and then covers our rough spots with them, creating something useful and beautiful. He does so because we are his people, and he loves us. He doesn’t just see the awful sin in us; he sees, and wants to bring out, the goodness in us. God is not only capable of acting but desires to do so. There is hope, both for us and for his creation.

Conclusion: So perhaps this prayer can help you in your waiting, whatever form that might be taking for you right now. Where do you need to cry out for God to take action? How has God acted in your past? What might you need to confess? What is the image of this God you are waiting upon? Are you willing, if he doesn’t move as quickly as you would like, to have him wait with you?