



Waiting for the Boats,

Marques de Oliverira, Joao, Portugal, 1892

While Waiting

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Prayer: Gracious God, patience does not always feel forward moving, allow us in this time the space and imagination to reconsider how you are patient with us and with the world, how our patience to stay the course may be living out our faithfulness...

“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found at peace...and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”

On a Sunday morning some years ago now, a man who was in mid-life woke up, like any other morning, got up, showered, and shaved, had breakfast, read the paper, and then he did something he had never done before in his life. He went to church. He lived just a few blocks away from a church, in a neighborhood, not unlike this one, he had been to the church in the past for weddings and funerals over the years, he had gone for the baptism of his sister’s baby, but he had never in his life gone for a regular Sunday service. He went on this morning, for his own reasons, and he sat quietly in a back pew, he stood up and sang the hymns, bowed his head and shut his eyes during the prayers, attentively listened to the scriptures and sermon – considering how it might apply to his own life, and he put exactly 10% of his weekly income in the offering plate as it went by – not more, not less. After an hour, when the service was over, he had a cup of coffee in the fellowship hall, and he went home. He thought about what had happened that morning, he evaluated the experience, and what was true for him, was that he had felt nothing especially spiritual, only the difference of being in a new place.

But for his own reasons, he went again the following Sunday, and afterward, he again felt nothing. He went every Sunday for a year. He still felt nothing, hymns became familiar, strangers in the congregation became acquaintances, but during worship, he felt nothing. Others around him seemed moved at times, he remembered watching the faces of his fellow worshippers at the Christmas service, while they sang the carols of the season, tears came to their eyes, and he wondered at them.

Finally he spoke one day to a church member he had come to respect, he confessed: “I feel absolutely nothing during worship, teach me, show me, how it is to feel the way that you do – I saw you cry at Christmas – I would like too, to be moved to tears by God, by the mystery which is beyond me touching my own life.” The woman thoughtfully considered this, and then she said, I think the only thing I can tell you is to keep coming to worship, and to pray that God will touch your heart, if it only happens once, it is worth the waiting.”

From that year forward he was a Sunday regular, and he died not long ago in the latter part of his 90’s, with great faith in God, peace about his life and relationships, and with hope for the world to come. He never intended to be a Saint, but he was honest about where he was with God, he prayerfully examined his own life, and waited years ...for the answers, and after a very long while he found that God was also honest with him: that God absolutely understood how inadequate he

was to come before him, and that it was that inadequate, unfeeling man whom Jesus gave his life for...sometime while waiting he had moved from the outward form of faith, into faith itself.

I tell you that story because our scripture this morning asks us to do a hard thing: We are asked to wait, to wait faithfully, to wait while living as if God's kingdom has come -- which it surely has not -- to wait and live short of faith's fulfillment. It asks us to put on the form of faith, a righteous life, before God has rebuilt the world over, vindicated us, and made a righteous life -- an easy life. "Where righteousness is at home," the scripture says, meaning its opposite: righteousness is not at home in our world -- yet! We are waiting for that -- not just waiting for it, but actively waiting into it.

This may seem inconsequential to you. For the early Christians who were living among the Greeks, this was a counter-cultural teaching. The Stoic philosophers, who were popular at that time, considered patience and humility to be vices, not virtues. The stoics taught that life was about seizing the moment, being all you can be, celebrating the hero or heroine's journey -- the strong, the powerful, the rich were admired -- be like them! The early Christians in 2 Peter are being asked to change the *nature* of their hope, another translation for the word you see as patience in the English, is "long suffering," a vice for stoics, a virtue for Christians. "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you..." (2 Peter 3:9) God has this quality of patience or long-suffering, which some would not consider good at all. The apostle Paul writes to his early churches a great deal about why it is important to be patient, that is, long suffering, and to be humble, precisely because it would have been so poorly understood. Patience and humility are failure to the stoics, but not for Christians who have hope.

Not many of us today are influenced by the Stoic philosophes, but there is nothing like the approach of Christmas to remind us of how wrong things really are: of what we don't have, what we might like to give but cannot, who we would like to be but are not, the time we do not have, people we wish were still alive but are not; today we are far from world peace -- the news from the Ukraine and Gaza, Israel and the West Bank speaks of intractable problems. For all that is wrong, another way to think of this slowness, is God's patience -- living in between the already and the not yet, variously, and with friction. II Peter says to regard "the patience of our Lord as salvation." That we have a moral compass at all, that we see injustice and recognize it is the beginning of overcoming it. Do you regard patience as salvation?

I am impressed by this because this is right up my alley: To be honest, I have days when I do not feel holiness radiating out of me in pure light. Not at all. I have days that are filled with good intentions, but not necessarily good works. I have days when I get up a little later than I mean to, forget things on my way out the door, am not as prepared as I could have been for meetings and appointments, say things that seem to come out wrong, or fail to say things that could have made a difference for someone who could use a good word from me. I have days that go by in a blur of activity: there are days that for whatever reasons God has, God's will is concealed from me -- shrouded in divine mystery -- and I just try to do the best I can with the limited information available.

Was God's will done last Tuesday? Was I, "holy on that day, as God is holy?" How would I know if I were? Some days mistakes are made, and it is clear enough, and then there are those days, which seem neither here nor there. The routine goes by and ...that is it, it just went by. There are days when that holy witness seems a long way away -- in between running errands and paying the electric bill (which has become an issue all on its own), in between the groceries and changing the batteries in the smoke detector, again, in the middle of decorating and wrapping gifts and can you

believe we are late for an oil change again? “The Lord is not slow about his promise, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish...”

As a mother I gained new insight into patience when our children were small. It was obvious to me that I expected “good behavior” that is, well-mannered civilized behavior, long before the child was able to comprehend its larger purpose. I asked for the behavior and expected understanding to sink in years later. The very first things children learn when they encounter each other is to share what they have on the playroom floor, to say “please” and “thank you” and “I’m sorry” if they have hurt someone, accidentally or on purpose – even from their highchair. These are concepts that are difficult for many adults – sharing, asking appropriately and politely for what you need, expressing thanks, asking forgiveness. And the smallest child is asked to live these concepts, although they and their peers have no concept of the depth and breadth they will take on in their lives.

This is what 2 Peter means when it says, “what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness...” it means that you’re living with people who are not; it means that you are asked to live according to God’s standards, even if you do not fully understand the greater good; it means that there is a lot still to be worked out, in your life and in the world, it means that we can regard patience itself, long suffering even, as part of salvation.

God was concealed in the flesh and blood of one man, whom people would have passed in the marketplace without looking at twice, the flesh and blood of someone who had to grow up, waiting a full 30 years before beginning his ministry. Jesus of Nazareth lived a life full of ambiguity – word did not *really* begin to get around about him until after he was dead...hard to have a witness when they do not know who you are. Going to Temple, saying prayers, listening to the scripture, dropping his money in the box... having days when he had to stay inside because it was raining, other days out fishing with his friends. All the holiness of God was concealed, patiently, in this man.

It is only because of this concealment that we can see him as he is.

*Only in hiding his love, wrapped in the suffering and injustice of his age, do we understand its depth for us and for our time.

*Only in death do we understand our life,

*Only in his humility do we see his glory.

“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found at peace...and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”

Friends wait for it. Be patient with yourselves and with one another. It isn't just Christmas that is coming. Wait for it!

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