

Waiting for the Miracle to Come

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First Lesson: Genesis 15: 1-18; Gospel Lesson: St. John 11:1-44

March 17, 2019 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

Sometimes God arrives late.

We wait for years for someone to come deliver us, to relieve our burdens, to free us from whatever chains may bind us, to deliver us from compulsions and temptations, to cure our sicknesses, to heal our diseases, to calm our fears, to comfort our griefs — to save us somehow. And sometimes the deliverance for which we wait just does not come, at least when we hope it will. So much of our lives are taken up by waiting for the miracle to come.

I'm reminded of a poem by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney about the plight of an abused and neglected child who had been imprisoned for years in a chicken roost. The superscription of the poem just reads: "He was discovered in the henhouse where she had confined him. He was incapable of saying anything." I'll read you the poem.

When the lamp glowed
A yolk of light
In their back window,
The child in the outhouse
Put his eye to a chink -

Little henhouse boy,
Sharp-faced as new moons
Remembered, your photo still
Glimpsed like a rodent
On the floor of my mind,

Little moon man,
Kenneled and faithful
At the foot of the yard,
Your frail shape, luminous,
Weightless, is stirring the dust,

The cobwebs, old droppings
Under the roosts
And dry smells from scraps
She put through your trapdoor
Morning and evening.

After those footsteps, silence;
Vigils, solitudes, fasts,
Unchristened tears,
A puzzled love of the light.

But now you speak at last

With a remote mime
Of something beyond patience,
Your gaping wordless proof
Of lunar distances
Travelled beyond love.

Today, I want us to gather into the arms of our faith this “silence,” these “vigils, solitudes, fasts,” these “unchristened tears,” this longing “beyond patience,” this waiting for the miracle to come. Many, maybe most of us have felt such waiting to one degree or another.

I wouldn't want to cheapen the tears of our waiting by rushing to some resolution that rescues God. We know better, and God doesn't need our rescue. In these Lenten days, I want us to reflect on two biblical stories of deliverance that doesn't come according to our timetable.

Maybe that sounds a little like blasphemy. But isn't this true?

Sometimes God comes late. The Bible tells us so. Scripture itself tells us that this is not a figment of an unfaithful imagination. God doesn't only come late to those who are less faithful, or less good, or to those who are not members of the appropriate religious heritage. God comes late even to those who love God and trust God deeply.

Our first lesson was Genesis 15:1-18, in which is told the story of an old man waiting for God to fulfill a miraculous promise, in which is embedded another story, the story of the Exodus of the Hebrew people. We know this story well: The people of Israel went down into the land of Egypt and sojourned there, and there they became a great multitude. And Pharaoh forced them into hard servitude. And they suffered in slavery, and the Lord heard the cry of their affliction and delivered them.

But, hold on just a minute! Something happened in the middle of this story - something that we too often and too easily slip right over.

The children of Israel did not just suffer a little and enjoy instant deliverance. They did not just suffer a few months, or a few years, but for four hundred years. They slaved for Pharaoh, under the lash of his taskmasters for four hundred years. Imagine four hundred years of poverty, oppression, and slavery. How many generations of people were born, and lived their whole lives, and died in the span of that four hundred years?

Imagine generation after generation after generation after generation of people being born, living, waiting, praying, waiting, crying out for God's help, waiting, dying without deliverance and being buried as slaves in a foreign land. (No wonder that African-American slaves latched on to this story of deliverance.)

And when God did raise up Moses, and Moses heard God's instructions in the desert, listen to what God tells Moses: “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their slave-masters for I am aware of their sufferings.”

“What, O Lord?! You have seen! You, O God, have heard! You are aware of the affliction of your people! How long, O Lord, have you seen, heard, been aware? Lord, this is not today’s headline. Your people have been suffering in bondage for 400 years. Does it take 400 years to get a message to you, O Lord?” Sometimes God comes late.

There’s another story I would like to visit this morning, if you will indulge me for just a few more moments. The Gospel tells us the surprising story of God’s late coming. It is a story which is particularly difficult to hear – but it is also the most wonderful; it brings us face to face with the reality of God’s deliverance that makes God’s late arrival more than endurable.

Jesus is teaching, toward the end of his earthly ministry, when a message reaches him that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha has become gravely ill. The text tells us how close Jesus and Lazarus were when it says: “Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick.” The writer of the Gospel comments: “Now, Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.” These three family members may have been Jesus’ closest friends. He speaks to the sisters as though they were his own sisters.

But notice this: When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed two days longer at the town where he was teaching before he started out to help Lazarus. There may have been some divine reason for his delay. We don’t really know what reason there was for the delay; perhaps Jesus was mistaken, thinking that Lazarus was not as ill as he was and that his illness would easily be set right. We don’t know exactly what was going on here. But from our vantage point, we can see two things: Jesus waited. And Lazarus died.

And when Jesus finally arrived at Lazarus’ village, Lazarus was already buried. We are told that when Martha went out to meet Jesus, when she saw him, she said, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Listen to the disappointment, the feeling of betrayal, of a trust broken in Martha’s words: “Lord, if you had just come when we called you, my brother would be alive now.” What must it have been like for Mary and Martha? The hours they spent waiting and watching down the road to see if Jesus was approaching, sitting by their brother’s bed watching him decline and wondering what was taking Jesus so long. Imagine their grief mixed with disappointment when Lazarus died. “Lord, why didn’t you just come when we called? Now, nothing can undo what has happened.”

The text says that Jesus looked around him at the family and friends grieving. He asked them to take him to where Lazarus was buried. They took him. And then we meet the briefest verse in all the Bible: “Jesus wept.” Some in the crowd probably said, “Oh, look. He did love Lazarus. See, he’s crying.” But perhaps others thought out-loud, “Sure, he cries now that it’s too late. But where was Jesus when we needed him. If Jesus had the power to do all those miracles for perfect strangers, why didn’t he help a friend?”

Karl Barth once said that faith for us takes the form of a particular kind of waiting. These sisters possessed such faith. But their brother was just as dead as he would have been had they not expected Jesus to save him.

Then something happened that nobody expected. Something happened that turned everything on its

head. We must understand this clearly if we are to make any sense at all of all our waiting and disappointment. Jesus came late. Sometimes God does not arrive on our schedule. There is no doubt that there are terrors and pains and griefs and oppressions and servitudes and struggles and temptations from which the faithful are not delivered. Even though we love God and even though God loves us, sometimes God does not go down into Egypt to rescue our generation. Sometimes God does not get to Bethany in time to save the life of our Lazarus. There is no denying this fact.

But there is something else we must say: When God arrives, God assumes the grief and tormented shape of our waiting, God takes into himself our suffering, our longing, our hope-disappointed yearning. God, when God comes, cries out in our humanity asking for a bitter cup to pass, begging not to be forsaken, crying for deliverance that does not come when desired.

Only by assuming the shape of our God-forgotten-waiting can God assume the shape of our hope. And this God does in Jesus.

Only by taking on our God-forsakeness can God have credibility among those who wait; only then can God claim the power to deliver and heal and raise from the dead, because God also has suffered rejection, loss, grief, suffering, the cross, the tomb.

Jesus, in this final story, stands beside the tomb of Lazarus and commands the stone to be rolled away from the door; he calls Lazarus to come forth and says to all of the disappointed who wait. "Did I not tell you that if you trusted, you would see the glory of God?"

This is the hope we need, this is the trust that makes it possible for us to live. We wait for the miracle to come because we know that nothing short of the impossible will be enough. Sometimes we wait long, but we do not wait alone. And we do not wait in vain.

"Now unto the God who is able to do abundantly more than all we ask or think, according to the power that works in us; unto God be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."