

Psalms 25:1-10

¹ To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. ² O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. ³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. ⁴ Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. ⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. ⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. ⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! ⁸ Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹ He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. ¹⁰ All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵ 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴ 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Active Waiting, Active Listening

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ,
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Text: *Psalms 25:1-10, Luke 21:25-36*

When having to wait, I'm often reminded of the first saying I learned as a young man after joining the Navy: "Hurry up...and wait!" we used to say. We waited in line for our powdered green eggs at the mess hall, and waited in line to get our inoculations against all kinds of bugs and diseases. Mostly we waited for the day when our military service would be finished. When we became "short-timers," we used to get a jar full of jellybeans, and during the last one hundred days we would eat a jellybean for each day that passed on the calendar. The fewer the number of jellybeans, the worse was our short-timer's attitude and behavior. We weren't much fun to be around for all those sailors who were *far from the bottom* of the jellybean jar.

When you think about it, we all spend a lot of our time waiting. Now, it's probably not a good idea to remind us of this, but remember last winter and how it seemed we waited forever for a warm day. Just when it seemed we might string together a few *less cold* days, we would get hit with another snowstorm. Perhaps, now is a good time for a *special prayer meeting* about the weather.

There is another kind of waiting we all experience, too. In our faith tradition, we have waiting down to a worshipful art. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. We wait with our Advent calendars for the joyous day in which we celebrate the incarnation and birth of Jesus; we get serious about giving up things during the Lenten approach to Easter; we wait during something called "ordinary time" (as if there ever really can be such a thing) in between the major waiting periods.

Waiting, waiting, and waiting.

Waiting to fall in love. Waiting for the pain in our relationship to subside. Waiting for the light to turn green. Waiting for the guy ahead of us to realize the light turned green ages ago! Waiting for peace on earth! Waiting for the Red Sox to win the World Series! Waiting on you. Waiting on me. Waiting on God.

The Psalmist said to us this morning: *Lead me in your truth, and teach me/for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*

Have you ever waited all day long for something you really wanted? Time slows down. Time becomes heavy. Waiting is hard work. It is challenging to feel each moment and open our selves to really listening to God. The Psalmist knows the power that waiting can have within us. The Psalmist calls upon us to wait in expectation for God. *I think God is working in our wait.*

The word of God does not come prepackaged or freeze-dried, nor is it sold in bulk. Sometimes it shouts at us, hits us over the head. But most of the time the word of God comes to us, as Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki would describe—*as a whisper*. The word of God comes to us *in a whisper*. In our waiting, God can plant a seed that lures us toward the good, toward wholeness or healing.

If we can be open and receptive to this whisper, this lure, this aim of God can shed light on our life's journey. In every moment of our existence God is acting through our wait. We can choose to listen. We can predispose our actions toward the lure of God, or we can choose to ignore this aim. We can take a different path. But if we can wait upon God in our soul, in and through our prayers, in and through listening to each other in community, in and through the daily events in our lives, perhaps we can become more receptive to the word of God—to the word that can redeem us, transform us, challenge us, or console us. We can allow for the seeds planted by God to grow and bloom.

There is a pilgrimage story that sheds some light on this way in which God works within us, planting seeds and luring us toward the good.

This pilgrim took off on a long journey in search of peace, joy, and love. The pilgrim's journey passed through landscapes that were not always happy ones—through war, sickness, quarrels, rejections and separations. The pilgrim passed through a land where the more people possessed, the more warlike they became; the more they had to defend, the more they needed to attack each other. Longing for peace, they prepared for war. Longing for love, they surrounded themselves with walls of distrust and barriers of fear.

One morning, the pilgrim came to a little cottage beside the road. Something about this little cottage attracted the pilgrim. Full of curiosity, the pilgrim went inside. And inside the cottage was a little shop, and behind the counter stood a shopkeeper. It was hard to judge the age of the shopkeeper or even to know for sure whether it was a man or a woman. There was also an air of timelessness about the place.

"What would you like?" asked the shopkeeper.

"What do you stock here?" asked the pilgrim.

"Oh, we have all the things here that I'm sure you most long for!" replied the shopkeeper. "Just tell me what you desire."

"Well, I want peace in my own family, in my native land, and in the whole world. I want those who are sick to be well again and those who are lonely to have friends. I want those who are hungry to have enough to eat." There was a pause, while the pilgrim reviewed this shopping list.

Gently, the shopkeeper broke in. "I'm sorry. I should have explained. We don't supply the fruits here. We only supply the seeds."¹

God has planted seeds and worked profoundly in my life while I have waited. Much of my early exposure to the church and its teachings were based upon a vision of a punishing, fearsome God. There were a lot of "no's" in the church I went to in my early childhood. No drinking, no smoking, no dancing, no movies, no lusting in your heart, no, no, no. And if you failed in these matters, well, you knew what was waiting for you.

Now, of course, these are memories from my childhood, and there was greater complexity to this church. But for years I wanted to have nothing to do with "organized religion." I felt I could love God and God could love me if I stayed a "sole practitioner" of my Christianity, my faith. But, thank God, slowly but surely, even imperceptibly, I began to discover a God of love and caring. A God more engaged in the here-and-now

¹Silf, Margaret. Adapted from *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*. Cleveland, OH. Pilgrim Press, 2003.

rather than a God who lived in city with pearly gates and streets lined with gold. I recaptured a loving God, an instinctual feeling of grace, through prayer, reading, talking to people of faith and hope, experimenting by attending churches in different denominations, and being inspired by acts of kindness and healing sermons. I didn't realize it, but I was waiting for God and God was waiting for me. We were waiting upon each other – and in the wait we were co-creating a new life.

Paul Tillich captures what the Psalmist conveyed to us about waiting for God. Tillich reminds us of the power of waiting upon something we do not possess and how *in the act* of waiting we begin to have redemption—that healing, that joy and sustenance for life that God can provide.² In our active waiting we are creating a space for God to fill, for God to work in our lives through God's word that lures and entices us toward wholeness and union. God *is* planting seeds. During the period in my life when I was waiting to return home to the church, God's *whispered* lure was at work in me. Even though we wait, we are not being passive. It is an active exercise in expectation. It is both faith and works.

The Christian faith is chin deep in waiting. When we read scriptural passages like our lesson from Luke this morning—lessons about the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud and signs in the stars and heavens—our thoughts naturally turn toward some kind of apocalyptic end of the world, the end of days. But is this really the message we should focus on, put our energies into? Perhaps there is a deeper message we should listen for—I think Luke is just setting stage for the more critically important wisdom message. *Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation*, Luke says. Dissipation? The dictionary defines dissipation as coming from the Latin root *dissipāre*: to spend wastefully, to squander. (American Heritage Dictionary, 2001) Luke says *be alert at all times*.

These words of wisdom from Luke are from the section of the book dealing with the destruction Jerusalem and the conversion of the Gentiles. The author is speaking to those members of the church community who have grown tired in waiting for the end of days, for the return of the Son of Man. The community had lapsed into a time of indulgence, self-pity, drunkenness, Luke says. In the seventeenth chapter of Luke, the author had earlier reported these words of Jesus to the Pharisees: The time is now, Jesus says, *for, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you*, he tells the skeptical Pharisees. (Luke 17:21b) This day, this hour, this moment is important, Jesus is saying. And what we do with our time, in our waiting, is the key to how we should love God and our neighbor. As Michaela Bruzzese writes in Sojourners magazine:

Judgment day is now, and we must respond now. Each day brings horrifying apocalypses for too many people around the globe, whether in Liberia, Southeast Asia, or Iraq. We all bear our own apocalypses—death, loss, illness, and addictions. How do we bring the good news to those who today suffer judgment after judgment, who plead for mercy, who ache to know the presence of the living God? Advent celebrations are hollow if they are about waiting passively. As an

² Tillich, Paul. *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. 1955.

Advent people, we always must be preparing for the incarnation, even and especially in the face of death and despair.³

In our waiting, the incarnation of God takes place in our neighbors and in our selves. But we must be alert to the opportunity. We must be open to listening to the whispered word of God. In our waiting we can co-create our lives with God.

As the Psalmist says: *Lead me in your truth, and teach me/for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.* As we wait upon the grace of God, let us engage in the work of active waiting and listening. Let us listen for *God's whisper*, for that *still small voice*. Let us study scripture, worship together, pray and meditate, sing, and talk, and share. Let us be engaged in healing the world. Let us be moved and let us move God. We can transcend the march of time entering into the larger emotional and spiritual landscape where in our waiting we are fed by the word of God, the life of Jesus, the relationship within community. Let us be active in our waiting and listening!

Amen.

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³ Bruzzese, Michaela. "Living the Word: If Not Now, When?" *Sojourners*, Nov.-Dec., 2003