

## Waiting

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Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA

Psalm 40; Luke 2: 21-40

### Theme:

*As hard as it is to wait and trust God in the midst of situations we cannot control, we are called to remember that God has been faithful in the past and to believe that God will provide in the future as well.*

**Merry Christmas!** The waiting is over! All the anticipation and craziness that builds up as we get closer and closer to the big day has once again dissipated as another Christmas Day has come and gone.

I'm sure there's quite a wide spectrum of reactions to that thought. Some of you are probably giving a great sigh of relief. After all the craziness of preparation that seems to begin ever-earlier each year, at last you can relax. For others, the relief may have more to do with getting beyond a day that can be so painful to those who don't feel merry at this season. Feelings of loss and loneliness are only made worse at times like this.

And then there's the kids. I suspect that many of you younger folks are already writing your Christmas lists for next year.

There is great irony in the fact that (in general) kids have the fewest holiday responsibilities and the least stress of preparation, and yet they have the hardest time waiting for Christmas! I remember when I was about eleven years old. I could not fall asleep on Christmas Eve no matter how hard I tried. My mother was downstairs up late doing what mothers do on Christmas Eve. So, after hours of tossing and turning I went down. (She heard me coming, so everything was fine.) I stood there in the kitchen literally shaking with anticipation of the presents to come the next morning. I just couldn't stand the waiting!

Now I'm sure none of you have ever done this, but my exasperated mother resorted to desperate tactics. She handed me a mostly empty wine glass and said, "Drink this!" I'd never had medicine that tasted like that! But it worked, and soon I was asleep in my bed, and my mother's work could continue. Her magic potion had somehow made me able to wait until the next morning.

I think there are times when all of us wish we had a true magic potion that made it easier for us to wait. Waiting, in its many different forms, is never easy. When we are forced to wait we are not in control – and that is very difficult, especially for us in McLean who are so good "making things happen." But waiting is a part of all of our lives.

Waiting is also a big part of the Christmas story and of our passage today. Let us remember back to the very first Sunday of Advent when Pastor Aaron spoke about Elizabeth and Zechariah, an older couple who had been waiting – desperately longing – for a child of their own for so very long. And then they were blessed with a son, who became John the Baptist.

Of course, this is immediately followed by the angel telling Mary that she will have her own baby, even though she isn't married yet. I think I can say with some certainty that this was not exactly the

news that Mary had been waiting for. Now, with the extremely limited options available to a young, poor, Jewish girl at the time, having a son was probably very much what she hoped and dreamed about. But perhaps she was hoping that would wait until *after* the wedding.

Similarly, Joseph and Mary had a different scenario in mind as they waited for the birth of Jesus. They probably didn't anticipate being forced to travel to Jerusalem, and they certainly weren't planning on the birth happening in a manger.

But it seems that the baby Jesus was exactly what Simeon and Anna from our passage today were waiting for. Simeon is an old and devout man, who has been waiting all his life to see the Messiah. And Simeon has no trouble spotting him.

As Joseph and Mary are entering the Temple, Simeon rushes over and takes the baby in his arms singing out his song of praise to God. At last, Simeon's hopes and dreams have come true. His long wait is over, and he rejoices!

Anna joins in. An 84-year-old woman who was denied what little comfort society at the time offered her by the untimely early death of her husband. No one would have blamed her for giving up hope, yet she has waited expectantly for what the passage calls "the redemption of Jerusalem," and sees it in Jesus.

What does "the redemption of Jerusalem" mean? It means that Simeon and Anna are not just two ordinary people. Rather, they are representatives of the entire nation of Israel that is waiting for God. They have lived under the military, political, cultural, and economic domination of one great superpower after another – some of whom tried to end their very existence. Yet Simeon and Anna represent the very best of Israel: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises.<sup>1</sup> Yes, the entire nation of Israel has been waiting for this moment when God's salvation has come.

It seems even heaven has been waiting for this moment. Before the stunned shepherds the heavenly host burst into song:

**"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!"**

(Lk. 2:14)

But hang on a minute! There is no "peace on earth!" There certainly isn't goodwill amongst all the world's people. There often isn't even goodwill within our own families. How can "salvation" have come if there is still so much that separates us from God, separates us from one another, and even leads us to being disconnected from who God made each of us to be?

Christmas has come and gone – the original Christmas and approximately 2,000 more since – and yet it would seem that we are still waiting. There is still war and suffering, famine and aching loneliness, grinding poverty and grief. As our first hymn asked, indeed "Shepherds *why* this jubilee? *Why* your joyous strains prolong?" It seems like nothing has really changed with the birth of the baby Jesus.

Scripture does not claim that instantaneously, with the birth of Jesus, all injustice, suffering, separation, and death end. Rather Scripture claims that in the birth of Jesus Christ we can see the beginning of the end of all the powers of destruction. Jesus has shown the way of true life and true love that will ultimately triumph. We are called to root ourselves in Jesus, to live out his ways as he calls each of us to do, and to wait in expectant hope for the victory of the way of Jesus that is to come.

Now today my focus is on that last piece – the waiting, which I would say once again is the hardest part for us here in McLean. We are people of action! We know how to get things done. And this congregation lives out the call of Christ’s love in so many different ways. From working with the Dreamers in Anacostia to working with the older adults at Chesterbrook Residences, from working with the mentally-challenged young adults at Langley Residential Support Services to the recent tag tree drive for those who are in need this holiday season, this congregation does a lot to help others. We can certainly do more to bring God’s peace and justice for all people into this world, but that is not our focus today. Instead we are focused on the part we cannot control: the waiting.

When I think about Simeon and Anna waiting in faithful, expectant longing all their lives for the “consolation of Israel,” “the redemption of Jerusalem,” God’s salvation, I am powerfully moved by that image. And my thoughts turn to a song written decades ago by my favorite rock band, U2.

As many of you probably know, U2 come from Ireland, which for hundreds of years has been bitterly divided by hatred between Protestants and Catholics. Religion is merely a tool and a trapping for the real issues of power, greed, and injustice there. Many of us here grew up hearing regular reports about bombings and other violence in Northern Ireland.

Bono, U2’s lead singer, grew up in the midst of that violence, and wrote these words:

I waited patiently for the Lord  
 He inclined and heard my cry.  
 He brought me right out of the pit,  
 out of my miry clay.  
 I will sing a new song,  
 How long to sing this song?  
 He set my feet upon a rock,  
 and made my footsteps heard.  
 Many will see,  
 Many will see and fear.  
 I will sing, sing a new song.  
 How long to sing this song?

Sound familiar? They are the first lines of our reading from Psalm 40 today, and the U2 song is titled “40.” The poignant question that Bono adds is “How long” until we can sing this new song of God’s deliverance? How long must we wait for the end of violence in Northern Ireland?

And yet, folks, the younger members of our congregation here today have no idea what I’m talking about. They’ve never heard of the “troubles” in Northern Ireland – except maybe in history class. That’s because over a decade ago a peaceful resolution was found to this ancient conflict. Of course, Northern Ireland is still working through the struggles of making that a lasting peace. But what a miracle! Many of us thought we’d never see that conflict end. But because of those who worked and prayed, acted and waited for peace, it has come.

What kept the hope of peace in Northern Ireland alive for Bono and so many others as they waited year after miserable year? What kept Simeon and Anna’s hopes alive as they waited for the birth of the Messiah?

It was the memory of God’s faithfulness. Reflect back to how Psalm 40 begins with remembering what God has done in the past before it turns to a cry for help with present distress. This is the key point:

It is vital that we remember God's faithfulness and goodness in the past as we wait; remembering the claim of Scripture: God's faithfulness and love are from everlasting to everlasting.

Again, this is the main point today: As we wait, we are called to remember the many, many blessings God has bestowed upon us already – and not just us personally but also to people all around us and those blessings witnessed in Scripture. These memories and the faith and hope they inspire are to sustain us as we wait, believing that the same God who was so good in the past will also be good to all of us again in the future – perhaps in ways we cannot even imagine.

This sounds good, but is not always so easy. We today are still waiting for the coming of the promises of Christmas. We are waiting for wars to end in Iraq and Afghanistan – and so many other places around this world. We are waiting for violence to leave our city streets, our homes, and our airplanes. We are waiting for all the world's people to have enough to eat, clean water to drink, and a place to call home.

On a personal level, some members of this congregation are waiting to get into college. Some are waiting for a cure to the disease that is destroying their body or that of a loved one. Some are waiting for an end to their aching loneliness. Some are waiting for life to really begin. Some are waiting for justice to run its course so life can begin again. Some are waiting for the pain of loss or trauma to lessen so that life can go on. Some are waiting to have a child. Some are waiting for their children to come home. Some are waiting for the healing of a broken relationship. Some are waiting for a time when they will again see friends and loved ones who have gone home to be with the Lord. Some are waiting just to feel safe again. Some are waiting to know the true meaning of peace and of love.

Christmas has come and Christmas has gone for another year, but in so many ways we are all still waiting. But I pray that you will remember the love and faithfulness of God manifested at Christmas as you wait. I pray that you will remember what God has done for you and those you love in the past, and remember that God's steadfast love is stronger even than death.

I want to end today by quoting the last speech of a man who knew this very well, Martin Luther King, Jr. He spoke these words in a speech given just before he was assassinated:

*"Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."*<sup>2</sup>

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

James E. Stover

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred. *Luke* in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY; 1990) p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. *I See the Promised Land*. 1968