

The Patience of God¹

2 Peter 3:8-15a

A sermon given by the Reverend Casey W. FitzGerald on the second Sunday of Advent, December 7, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness,¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish;¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

About a year ago I started a mom's group that meets each Friday morning in Creation Station. Mothers come with children of varied ages, mostly to socialize. I see it as a great way to get our youngest children more and more used to the church, and it gives me a way to get to know them better as well. The experience has definitely been a highlight of each week. Selfishly, even as I seek to be a pastor to these families, I am always watching the various parenting styles in action to file away in my brain for use as my son, Will, gets older. I had to laugh this past week when I heard a mother echoing the words I had heard so often growing up... "Santa's watching!" It still amazes me that this looming threat of Santa's judgment has such power! I think my mom started threatening us with Santa Claus no later than June of each year.

A wonderful seminary professor of mine had another idea with regards to this yuletide warning and children. As a young and perhaps a tad overzealous new associate pastor, Dr. Black had been assigned the children's sermon one Advent Sunday. When it was time, the children gathered dutifully before him, no doubt expecting a traditional Advent/Christmas moment concerning giving and receiving or something along those lines. Instead, he gave them a most intimidating glare and spoke a reworded version of a treasured Christmas tune: "You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout I'm telling you why: Jesus Christ is coming to town." The children were terrified and I believe he spent some of his Advent season atoning to parents, children, and congregants. Of course, when the judgment of Jesus Christ is presented, there is a lot more on the line than what's beneath the Christmas tree. But part of me wonders if we truly do connect with this major tenet of our faith—that Jesus Christ will come again.

I have always been weary of discussing the "end times" and the details of Jesus' return. Perhaps this is because it just doesn't seem like it's really going to happen in my lifetime. Last week, reflecting on Isaiah, I spoke about the apparent hiddenness of God and the longing that is ours in Advent for God to come into our lives. Once again we hear the reflections concerning a people who are getting frustrated that their waiting for God might not end. At the time this letter was written, there was serious doubt it would happen at all. We are far removed from the apocalyptic urgency felt by our Christian ancestors, and so too, it seems were Second Peter's audience. The Christians to whom the author of second Peter writes find themselves in a similar position to that of the Israelites—their longing is fading—they are beginning to look elsewhere for fullness of life. Peter fears that because of their impatience, they have begun to disregard their original call to righteousness. He asks them

to be patient, for “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” He gives the good ol’ “God’s time” defense.

We may be able to hear our *own* thoughts echoed in the concerns of the people that God isn’t coming...and perhaps we have lost our concern about the issue altogether. At once speaking of these earlier Christians and ourselves, author Gracia Grindal writes, “Taking their eyes off the prize they become too earthly minded to prepare to meet the Lord. Thinking of such things does not really fit in with office Christmas parties, Christmas cheer and all the gaiety of the season. The disconnect has struck a lot of people in the pew, who wonder why the pastor has gotten so grim just when the calendar has gone sweet.”

Indeed, many of us would be just fine going about our lives relatively unconcerned about whether or not Jesus comes again. New Testament scholar PHEME PERKINS believes the majority of us have a difficult time “digesting” the idea of the end of the world, for different reasons. She writes, “Despite the fact that we refer to Christ’s return several times at every service, a sampling of parishioners elicited almost universal agreement that they never thought about the second coming. Older members of the congregation expect to be with Jesus and their loved ones when they die. If God wants to end the world sometime, okay, but it doesn’t matter to them. Younger people generally replied that maybe Jesus would come and end the world, but they’d bet more money on scientific theories.... Like their elders, they thought that ‘getting to heaven’ was the main point of religion, and that judgment would be taken care of when people died. Traditional doctrine that separates the postmortem fate of the soul from the ‘new creation’ and resurrection of the body at the second coming also enjoys little support.” From Perkins analysis, it seems that we care very little of the “how” we are reconciled to God. And though Peter talks about everything being “dissolved with fire” along with other “details” of the “day of the Lord,” he is mainly concerned with what happens in the meantime.

Whereas Isaiah speaks with God, Peter writes to the people and gives us instruction as to how we go about living this life in waiting. Earlier in the letter, he writes, “... you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.” Clearly this can’t get done in the next two and a half weeks...you know, just in time for Christmas. And it is hard to feel any sense of urgency when it is clear, given the length of time that has *already elapsed* between Jesus’ incarnation and the present day, that Jesus might not come again in our lifetime.

According to theologian William Brosend, the people wonder:

- 1) will it be worth the wait?
- and
- 2) what should I do in the meantime?

We might ask ourselves these same questions during Advent. Of course, there may be some assumption on the part of the worshipping community that the second coming/God’s redemption will, indeed, be worth the wait. Such seems to be the understanding of those parishioners interviewed by Perkins. But what *should* we do in the meantime?—because I believe that this is where our pericope from Isaiah left us.

I do want to point out that if we really believe that Jesus will return to us—that God’s promises will ultimately be fulfilled—our response will not be limited to hope. As we heard last week, Isaiah’s wasn’t. Isaiah *anxiously* awaited God’s promises to be fulfilled. He prayed that God would come down once again to care for his people. And his cry led to confession. Hope is good and important, and an integral part of the Advent word—but it may be that we cannot get to hope without having gone through some sort of confession. How can we have hope or “be at peace, without spot or blemish,” without first acknowledging and confessing our brokenness and sin?

Deitrich Bonhoeffer gave such an Advent response of humility and confession, writing: “Lord Jesus, come yourself, and dwell with us, be human as we are, and overcome what overwhelms us. Come into the midst of my evil, come close to my unfaithfulness. Share my sin, which I hate and which I cannot leave. Be my brother, Thou Holy God. Be my brother in the kingdom of evil and suffering and death. Come with me in my death, come with me in my suffering, come with me as I struggle with evil. And make me holy and pure, despite my sin and death.” This was his Advent wish. It was not a wish for material goods, family gatherings, or even peace on earth—it was the cry of a self-professed sinner to the God of redemption. It is the cry of one who has not yet found his way out of exile. It is the cry of one who waits for God in the season of waiting. It is the cry of one who lives with the knowledge that Jesus Christ might not come again in his lifetime...AND YET...it is the cry of one who thought that the kingdom of righteousness that had begun with Jesus’ incarnation could be hastened by his own actions.

Unfortunately, as songwriter Tom Petty put it: “the waiting is the hardest part.” And waiting is hard. Concerning Advent waiting, Bonhoeffer explains: “A longing emerges within us, which will not be silenced, a longing that all should be fulfilled amidst all the failures and against all the evidence, yet we protest its fulfillment all the stronger. This is a waiting within us for nothing less than that this world will be redeemed through and through—not by this or that political means, but by God. When God himself comes to us, then Advent truly begins to become real.” We wait in darkness for the light of the world.... And Peter waited in this darkness as well. But all the while, he exhorts us to move ahead—to live as best we are able with our eyes set toward God. The truth is, we *will* fumble, but because we *do have confession and hope* as a part of our tradition, we will pick ourselves back up. We will *practice* living in God’s righteousness.

Mornings for Moms (and kids) is like a little laboratory for the children, where boundaries are tested and retested, where kids get to practice their social skills. The kids crack me up—they come to the room so very excited to see one another, only to get somewhat testy when toys, attention, and or snacks are on the line. I think the concept of “frenemy” was born in a playgroup somewhere. (For those of you unfamiliar with the slang term, one definition reads: “Frenemy: Someone who is both friend and enemy, a relationship that is both mutually beneficial or dependent while being competitive, fraught with risk and mistrust.”ⁱⁱⁱ) This past week, I think I saw two children trade snacks—one Cheerio for one oatmeal raisin cookie. (It was either a little miracle or a masterful piece of bartering on the part of the original Cheerio owner.) Together, the children learn to communicate, to share, to stand up for themselves, to show compassion, to love the church space and hopefully, to love the Church and God. They come in totally excited for shared play time and find that it is not always so fun or easy as they had imagined. And yet, each week they return, eager to see one another, to share and play and test the boundaries of their peers and parents. It is like they have hit the reset button and are willing to give their little friends another chance. Indeed, it is not always perfect, but there is *always* an opportunity for just a little bit of growth.

This play, mess up, and reset is just what we are asked to do...try, fumble, confess...and try again. Like our children, we must live with the hope that someday we will get it right. Peter might call it “making a home for righteousness.” And the good news, the *really good news* is that even as we are waiting for God, God will wait for us. “Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation,” writes Peter. Jesus Christ has not yet come again...but this gives us the opportunity to work more diligently on bringing God’s righteousness to our world. God is like a mother—she brings us into the world, gives us love and support, but also rules and guidelines. The world is our playgroup, and she watches us as we attempt to live in it fully. She lets us make mistakes, even though it can be utterly painful for her. And she waits for us patiently to try again and again—that we might have the fullness of life she sought to give us even before we were born. During Advent, let us practice righteousness and thereby, let us hasten the kingdom of our God, who loves us in spite of ourselves and waits for us patiently until Jesus comes again.

ⁱ References will be cited in a few weeks online!