



FINDING GOD: BY WAITING

August 6, 2017, Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 2:25-38

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

“When I pray I feel nothing.”

“I read the Bible every day but I am not sure it makes any difference in my life.”

“Lately, when I go to worship it feels like I am just going through the motions.”

These are all common maladies that people experience in their lives as they are trying to be faithful. Sometimes the life of faith is rich and full and fertile. Our efforts at being in relationship with the divine are rewarded and God is clearly present with us. And then there are times in which the life of faith can feel pretty dry and sparse. Our efforts at being in relationship with God appear to bear no fruit. It feels as if we are just waiting around for something/anything to happen.

In this fourth sermon in the series “How we Find God (Or God Finds Us),” we will be considering the ways in which waiting plays a role in our relationship with the divine. Needless to say waiting is rarely considered a pleasurable pastime. Waiting is often characterized by delay and lack. We wait in lines at the grocery store. We wait on subway platforms. We wait in doctors’ offices. And sometimes, we wait on God.



We are currently in the liturgical season referred to as the Sundays after Pentecost, or what used to be called Ordinary Time. In Ordinary Time, the liturgical color is green. I dearly love the color green. But I have to tell you it gets a little monotonous all of these weeks between Pentecost in June and All Saints Sunday in November. The green symbolizes spiritual growth. But spiritual growth, like the subtle growth of plants, is not always that dramatic or even noticeable. Basically the liturgical color hints at the fact that our daily lives seeking deeper relationship with God can run the risk of being just as exciting as sitting around watching the grass grow in Central Park.

Now that I have pretty much condemned the liturgical season of Ordinary Time and the drudgery of spiritual growth, let's see if our text from Luke can dig us out of this morass. Mary and Joseph bring their newborn infant Jesus to the temple for all the rituals required under Jewish law. While they are there, they encounter Simeon and Anna. This encounter is not by happenstance. It is not some coincidence that they bump into these two folk. It was foreordained by God that this would happen. Now, I am not saying that God whispered in Simeon and Anna's ears that morning instructing them to race over to the temple in order to be brought face to face with this baby Messiah. Unfortunately God rarely works like that. God rarely brings us a direct specific message about when and where we can receive an epiphany, a vision of the divine in our midst.

What God's Holy Spirit will do is give us a nudge in a direction. The Spirit had given Simeon a nudge. He believed he would see the Messiah before he died. What we do not know is how many years ago Simeon had been given this nudge. How many years was he waiting for the fulfillment of this promise? How many years was he "looking forward to the consolation of Israel" or how another translation puts it, "awaiting a comfort?" How many seasons? How many weeks? How many days, day after day, did he get up in the morning and head on over to the temple "awaiting a comfort?" What crossed his mind as he did this over and over again?



He is described as “righteous and devout,” but even the righteous and the devout have their doubts. Even the righteous and the devout grow weary of the monotony of routine. Even the righteous and the devout grow impatient with God.

I would not classify myself as righteous and devout, but I know there have been times in my life when I have been impatient with God. I have struggled and strained with God seeking a vision of what is to come. And I still have days like that. But I have tried to change my mindset to be less about peering into the future and more about trying to abide with expectation, knowing that while timing is always unknown, God’s promises are always sure.

I have spoken already about Ordinary Time but perhaps there are other liturgical seasons we should be considering as we think about waiting. We have two seasons, Advent and Lent, that are all about waiting, waiting with expectation. In Advent we await the arrival of a savior in our midst. And in Lent we await the arrival of God’s victory over death. But in both of these seasons, waiting is not about inaction, it is not about staring at the clock and wondering how much longer. Both seasons call us to preparation, urgent preparation. In Advent we are called to prepare our hearts and our world for the arrival of the Christ child. In Lent we are called to follow Jesus as He journeys to the cross. In both cases, waiting is not merely a passive activity.

And this is certainly the case for Simeon and Anna. They are far from doing nothing. Simeon and Anna are in the temple every day. They are praying. They are engaging in the time-honored rituals of their tradition. And on those days when their efforts might seem a little stale, they still keep at it. But why? How? When it feels as if God has done nothing to bring the divine promises any closer to fruition, what gives them this steadfast patience to carry on?

I think they had a deeper understanding of waiting for God than we might. When we are waiting upon our God it is not a one-way street of merely wondering when God will act. In the act of waiting, we are being changed. When we think we are waiting on God, in actuality it may be God waiting upon us. God may be waiting



upon us to become the people we need to be in order that we may receive the blessings we have been promised. What may seem like another day in which nothing much has been revealed to us, a worship service that does not ring any particular bells for us, another Bible passage read that does not bring us any electric insight, another prayer we have offered that seems to go unanswered, may in actuality be slowly, incrementally, imperceptibly, changing who we are.

When we call out, “God, do something!” God may very well be doing something. And that something may not be the external thing we are waiting upon but rather slowly forming us into the person we need to be before that external thing can happen.

The author Tish Harrison Warren writes this, “Alfred Hitchcock said movies are ‘life with the dull bits cut out.’ Car chases and first kisses, interesting plot lines and good conversations. We don’t want to watch our lead characters going on a walk, stuck in traffic, or brushing their teeth—at least not for long, and not without a good soundtrack. We tend to want a Christian life with the dull bits cut out. Yet God made us to spend our days in rest, work and play, taking care of our bodies, our families, our neighborhoods, our homes.

What if all these boring parts matter to God? What if days passed in way that feel small and insignificant to us are weighty with meaning and part of the abundant plan God has for us?”¹

The trudging and the drudgery may indeed be part of the plan God has for us, part of the way we are being shaped to receive blessing.

I wonder what kind of savior Simeon and Anna were looking for when they first began their vigils in wait for the Son of God. In all that is to come in Jesus’ life, many will not recognize who He is. Some will doubt He is the savior because he does not save with military might, expelling the occupying Romans. Some will doubt He is the savior because he heals on the Sabbath and spends time with



people who are considered undesirable. Some will doubt He is the savior because He dies.

But Simeon and Anna see something in this littlest one, only days old. And not only that they see the complicated journey that is before him. Simeon announces Mary,

“This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Simeon can see that this savior will not bring the non-stop victory parade that so many assume will come. I am betting he did not know these things when he first began his wait “for a comfort to Israel.” I am betting it took Simeon and Anna decades in the temple, day after day, for them to comprehend for whom they were waiting. It took a long time for them to understand the subtleties and complexities by which God is at work in the world. It was a long journey before they were able to recognize God’s saving presence in their midst.

And so it is with us. We want to recognize God at work in the world and particularly at work in our lives. We crave epiphany, a revelation of the divine in our midst. And now would be a really good time for it. And then again next Sunday and the Sunday after that. But there are seasons in our lives in which we engage in the rituals of our faith and less is revealed to us than we might like. We find ourselves waiting on God to reveal Godself to us. We find ourselves scanning the horizon for a comfort to be given. And we can begin to assume nothing is happening as we wait for this.

Something is happening. God is at work in us, using our waiting as a way to shape us into who we need to be to recognize the divine’s saving comfort at work in all times and all places and especially in each of our hearts.

Thanks be to God. Amen.



¹ Harrison Warren, Tish, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2016, pp. 21-22.