

WAITING ROOM

ISAIAH 40:1-11; 2 PETER 3:8-15A
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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DECEMBER 10, 2017/SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Part of my sermon preparation each week often includes listening to a few lectionary-based podcasts when I drive to and from the church.

Usually this is just a few people sitting around talking about the four texts each week and offering preachers insights or suggestions for how to understand the passages or what they might consider preaching on.

Sometimes these podcasts are insightful. Often, they're not. But I tell myself that it's a better way to spend my morning commute than listening to advertising on the radio. 😊

It's interesting to hear how people other than me approach the texts each week.

The first podcast I listened to this week seemed almost embarrassed about the passage you just heard from 2 Peter 3.

All that language about the world being destroyed does nothing but provide ammunition for climate change deniers! The world's going to burn anyway, so why bother taking care of it now?! This is the stuff of religiously fuelled nightmares! Best to leave passages like this unread. So they said, at least.

In the second podcast I listened to, the commentators had talked about Isaiah's words of comfort and hope, and the Psalm of the day; they had talked about Mark's passage on wild-eyed John the Baptist stalking around with his camel hair and locusts, calling people to repentance in the wilderness.

There was only about five minutes left when they finally got to the reading from 2 Peter 3 and said, “Do you think that any preachers are actually going to preach from this passage on the second Sunday of Advent?”

Well, that sounded almost like a dare. ☺

Yes, this is the Sunday where John the Baptist tends to be the obvious choice.

And Isaiah’s vision of valleys being lifted up is an Advent staple. Wisdom and Wonder’s conversation earlier was all about the hope of God making straight the path through the desert. I wanted to make sure that we had at least heard those familiar words in worship today.

But I will be focusing primarily on 2 Peter this morning.

Again, it’s a passage many people would prefer to avoid. There is fiery apocalyptic language about the elements being dissolved in fire, about the day of the Lord coming like a thief, and everything that has ever been done being laid bare!

It also includes a whole section about holiness, which for some people is perhaps an even more unpleasant topic than the end of the world!

It is a passage that comes across as bracing, confrontational, and not easy to swallow.

The world is going to roast in flames and so you’d better make sure you’re behaving yourself when Jesus comes! This is how some preachers have approached this passage, with what at times seems almost like zealous glee.

Yet I think that when properly understood, this passage fits well with traditional Advent themes of preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ.

It also fits well with our worship theme *this* Advent, which is taken from Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel: “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary’s words could be summarized thus: I want what you want for me. I want my life to conform to God’s purposes. I want to be open to God using me. I want to prepare my heart for his coming.

This ought to be our desire, as well. 2 Peter 3 helps us to do that, as I hope we'll see this morning.

If I had to summarize what this passage is about, I would say this: It gives us a theology of waiting.

In that light, I want to begin with a story about waiting.

A few years ago, I had a full weekend at home alone with the kids. It had included the usual worship service preparation, our church's AGM, as well as basketball games and swimming trials, and hosting a friend for night that was stopping in on his way back to British Columbia. All of this was normal stuff.

What wasn't normal was a 3 am trip to the local Emergency Room to deal with a dislocated toe that Nicholas sustained here at the church.

Anyone who has spent any time in an ER waiting room on a Friday night/Saturday morning will have little difficulty imagining the scene that Nick and I groggily stumbled into.

There was a young couple with a colicky infant, and a middle-aged woman who seemed to be struggling with stomach pain.

But other than that it was mostly a sampling of severely intoxicated humanity splayed out around the waiting room contending with the fruits of their partying labours that evening.

Broken, bleeding hands, bite wounds, torn shirts, black eyes and swollen faces and an assortment of other relatively minor injuries all being negotiated in the fog of alcohol and fatigue. It was an interesting scene for an eleven-year-old boy and his weary father.

One guy in particular was determined to gain an audience with me and eager to provide a blow-by-blow description (literally) of what the evening's events had held for him. He had come to the defense of a couple of young women who were being harassed.

He had told the guys to back off, but they wouldn't listen. He was thus obliged to pummel them both (singlehandedly) while being accosted by a handful of other bystanders. "I work out, so I'm pretty tough," he said.

"Sounds like quite a night," I said.

After about an hour of rehearsing different variations of this story, my new friend began to assume a more reflective tone. "Man, I'm too old for this," he said at one point. "I'm a family man... I got a daughter, I got a job... I can't be doing this anymore." But it didn't take long until he had reverted back to the glories of battle.

Soon after, we were summoned together to the next stage of our three-hour ER sojourn. Our friend was getting more desperate. He wandered around apparently aimlessly, asking random people where the doctor was, stealing miscellaneous medical supplies from the shelves, settling restlessly back into his chair.

I was tired of pretending to listen to his stories by this point, and growing desperate for some respite from his increasingly unwelcome attentions. Mercifully, he was quiet for a bit.

An hour or so later, I heard him start to speak more softly. His eyes were closed. "God, get me out of here... God I need help... I need you..."

Then he started snoring.

And so we sat there together, in silence, waiting for help to arrive. Each desperate, in our own way and for our own reasons—I to get my son home to bed and prepare for my upcoming meeting, he to sleep off what I assumed would be one doozy of a hangover.

As I reflected on the experience—then and since—it occurred to me that the waiting room is not a bad metaphor for life.

We're all broken in various ways and for various reasons. We're all waiting for help to arrive. We don't know when the doctor is coming. And so we wait.

Sometimes we wait patiently, expectantly, hopefully, actively.

Other times, we don't. We grumble and groan. We stalk the hallways, angry and wondering why the doctor won't come. We complain about the system. We imagine that our needs are more important than everyone else's.

Sometimes we make a lot of noise while we wait. Sometimes we pray. Sometimes, we just fall asleep.

The question I want us to consider on this second Sunday of Advent is a simple one: How are you waiting? How *ought* we wait?

What is the theology of waiting that this passage offers us?

I think there are three things that we ought to take away from this passage to aid us in our waiting.

1. GOD IS PATIENT

2 Peter 3:8-9:

With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 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.

If we back up a few verses, we see that these words are a response to scoffers asking, "So where is this Jesus whose coming you are so convinced about?"

The early church without question expected Jesus to return early, within their lifetime. The longer his coming was delayed, the more they had to wrestle with this theologically.

Peter anchors the delay in God's patience and God's goodness.

We human beings think of time in terms that are conditioned by our experience, which is profoundly limited. We grow impatient easily because we know our time is relatively short. We imagine that God doesn't exist because he doesn't conform to our expectations and demands.

But a lifetime for us is but a blip in cosmic time. God has all the time in the world. Literally.

And he waits because he wants all people to turn to him. He waits because he loves his people and does not want any to perish. Contrary to those who imagine that God selects only a few special people to pluck out for salvation, this passage shows us that God's deep desire is that all might be saved.

God's delay is a mercy, an expression of his deep patience and devotion to all who bear his image.

2. WE ARE ACCOUNTABLE

2 Peter 3:14-15:

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

For some at the time, the delay of Christ's coming was an excuse for indulgence. Earlier in chapter 3, Peter says that those who scoff at those who claim that Christ will return use this as an excuse to indulge their evil desires. Kind of like if the parents are away for the weekend, and the kids decide to party.

The response is understandable, on one level. If you think Christ's coming is imminent and it turns out not to be so, it's easy to think, "Well, he doesn't seem to be coming so who really cares what we do?"

Peter says the opposite. He reminds them that their behaviour in the present ought to reflect the future they are waiting for.

If you believe the new heaven and earth that is promised exist because of Christ and for Christ and will be patterned after the life of Christ, then *live* that way as you wait for its coming. Strive to become the sorts of people who are at peace with God, others, and creation.

If you are convinced that the coming kingdom will be a place where "righteousness is at home" (v. 13), then be righteous and holy people now, as you wait.

Be a colony of heaven in the country of death, as Eugene Peterson puts it.

Live anticipatory lives—lives that point like a road sign to the final destination.

3. CHRIST *WILL* COME AGAIN

We don't know when, obviously. But then, as we saw last week, Jesus told us that we wouldn't.

We don't even know how. This passage paints a fairly vivid picture of things, but should probably be cautious in reading these descriptions in overly literal ways.

Whenever the NT talks about eschatology, it does so in highly symbolic and poetic language.

The NT writers were in general much more comfortable with speaking allegorically and metaphorically than we are.

So when we hear about the elements being dissolved in fire and the heavens being set ablaze, we probably shouldn't be trying to envision literal scenes of meteorological and geological fireworks. It seems likely that this was simply their way of saying that when Christ comes again, it will have cosmic consequences. There is nothing that will remain unaffected.

We don't know what the precise connection will be between the present configuration of things and what will be. And we would be foolish to speculate.

We would be even more foolish to imagine that because of a few poetic and symbolic passages in the Bible, we have license to disregard God's creation (as some use passages like this to justify)—particularly in light of other passages which exhort us to embrace our role as stewards of God's garden.

What we *should* take from this passage is that when Christ comes, justice and righteousness will finally be a permanent reality.

It's hard for us to imagine this though, isn't it? Even if we don't over-literalize this passage, we have a hard time imagining something so foreign to our experience.

Yet it is a duty of faith for us to keep our minds open to being surprised by God.

It's so easy and natural to think that the way things are is the way things will always be. Our experience of the way things tend to go and how the world works—we imagine this is how it's always been and how it always will be.

The rich and the powerful get their way, while the poor suffer.

Wars rage on.

Righteousness is not always rewarded. Injustice seems to flourish. Death lays waste to our ambitions.

We struggle along with our bad habits and our struggles and our doubts and our fears.

Ho hum. Business as usual. Nothing new under the sun.

The season of Advent, passages like 2 Peter 3, and Isaiah 40 call us to a bigger imagination—a theological imagination, an imagination that's not governed and limited by the world of our experience and observation but by the vision of God.

One writer put it this way:

Advent is a time to remember that we have a story that isn't the world's story. We forget this at the cost of our integrity, identity and spiritual health.¹

And it's not as though we just make all this up—as if we're saying, well the way things are isn't super great, so we'll just imagine a better world and console ourselves with that.

Our imagination as Christians and our hope for the future is *profoundly* rooted in memory, in the tradition and stories handed down to us from Jesus and the early church, where we see that God decisively did something new—something utterly unlike “business as usual.”

Christ's first coming was an interjection of newness into centuries, millennia of oldness.

¹ <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/78038>

This is the seedbed of our hope. God has done it before. God did it decisively in Jesus. And God will do it again.

So, this is the theology of waiting that we are offered here, midway through Advent.

God is patient.

And we, who live in the waiting room, are invited to learn patience, too. Life *is* kind of like a waiting room. But the term has a double meaning. It can also point to the vital truth that God gives room for us to learn how to wait well for his coming.

We are accountable

Our waiting is to be of a certain kind. Expectant. Active. Determined.

We are to be pursuer of holiness and purity in a culture that so often rewards the crude, the ugly, the divisive, the inhuman.

Christ will come again.

We anticipate a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

May God help us wait well.

And to live well in anticipation of the one for whom we wait.

Amen.

