

Down to the River

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

December 4, 2011

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Sermon

From the beginning, the church has been waiting. When Jesus was dead and buried, the church waited until the third day. When Jesus was about to ascend to the right hand of the Father, the church was waiting, waiting for everything to be put right (cf. Acts 1:6).

Through centuries of expansion and persecution, the church has waited. Through the turmoil of schism and reformation, the church has waited. Through awakenings and pentecostal revivals, the church has waited. You see where this is heading. The church waits, waits for the Lord's advent, waits for the Lord to come to us. Always the church waits.

AND WE KNOW ABOUT WAITING. When you're sick and need to see a doctor, what do you do? You wait, either in a waiting room or at home because the earliest opening is next Thursday. When you're young and on the hunt for your first real job, what do you do? You wait. You send out resumes. You burn through cell phone minutes. And you wait.

But what are we supposed to do with ourselves while we're waiting? Especially if what we're waiting for isn't getting any closer? Peter wrote his second letter with a question like that in mind.

There was a complaint. No, let's call it an observation, the kind of observation any of us could make, an observation born of frustration. Simply put, nothing ever changes. From as far back as we can remember, beyond that even, nothing ever changes. Jesus is supposed to come, and that is supposed to change everything. But are we going to live to see it? Is it ever going to happen?

Peter responded to the frustration by urging a little perspective. *It's about how we keep track of time, Peter says. Remember, God doesn't experience time the same way we do. With God a thousand years are like a day. And with God a day is like a thousand years* (cf. 2 Peter 3:8).

Now that's not a precise formula. It's just a way to indicate that our perspective on time, our experience of the passing of time, is not the only way to look at things. It's a reminder that there is a larger picture than the picture we see.

When I stand on the front corner of our property and look to the south and west, it seems like a good size piece of ground. More than I want to take care of, that's for sure! But if I stood on the moon and looked back toward the earth, those five acres would be invisible. With that in mind, imagine what things look like – things that seem like the whole world to us – imagine what those things look like from God's perspective.

So, yes, our experience may be that we're waiting and waiting and waiting, and nothing is ever changing, certainly not for the better (Steven Pinker to the contrary!). But there is another way to see things. There is God's way of seeing things. And it's God's way of seeing things that determines how things really are. That's what Peter says. And he's right, right on the money – metaphorically speaking.

BUT PETER'S EXPLANATION DOESN'T satisfy everybody. So other approaches are necessary. We find one of those other approaches in Isaiah 40. There the prophet gives us a view from the end of the exile, and it's all about God coming back. The return of God to Jerusalem and the end of the exile go hand in hand. Isaiah 40 gives us the prophet's reflections on what's about to happen. Or, dare I say it, Isaiah 40 gives us the prophet's spin of what did happen.

The LORD's glory appears, the LORD's way back is made level and smooth, because the LORD has commanded it (cf. Isaiah 40:3-5) and the LORD's word can't be broken. Grass dries up; flowers wither. But God's word endures forever (cf. Isaiah 40:8). That was the hope. Or that was the spin. It was the spin. Because the return to Jerusalem was anything but glorious.

THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM: only a small number of exiles made the trip. The rest stayed in Babylon. They had made a life for themselves there. That's what the prophet Jeremiah had encouraged them to do (cf. Jeremiah 29:4-7). They weren't ready to uproot themselves on such an uncertain project. Sure, there were voices saying it was the will of God, that they wouldn't be going alone, that God would be returning to Jerusalem with them. But most people weren't ready to trust the voices of religious fanatics. So they stayed put.

Those that did return to Jerusalem, what did they find? They found a mess. They found a broken-down city with a ruined wall. They found a temple laid waste, stripped of its treasures. They found a recipe for discouragement. There was so much to rebuild. There was an entire community and an entire way of life to re-establish.

And where was God? The return from exile didn't play out like the old stories. There was no pillar of cloud and fire leading the way. There were no well-built cities to occupy and mature vineyards to enjoy. And there was no overwhelming presence of the LORD to fill up the second-rate temple they had managed to throw together, a temple that was nothing like the temple in the stories about old King Solomon.

And so the returned exiles were left waiting. For hundreds of years again, they waited. Waited for the exile really to end. Waited, in other words, for God to return. Only then would the exile be over.

BUT WHO CAN BLAME THEM if they told the story a different way? Who can blame them if, to buck up their own courage – who can blame them if, to forge their own resolve – who can blame them for telling the story as if God had come back? as if God had gone before them? as if God had gently led them back to Jerusalem, carrying the ones who were weak or heavy laden? (cf. Isaiah 40:9-11).

And who can blame a prophet for claiming the presence of God? Certainly there's no place where God is not present. You can't blame a prophet for highlighting that fact. That's what prophets do.

TAKE JOHN, THE BAPTIZER, a prophet at last. And that point is not to be minimized. It had been a long time without a duly accredited prophet in Israel. The years had been long and hard and disappointing. The heavens had been quiet. The old stories echoed, but there was no new message. Until John. John, who came in the spirit and in the guise of Elijah (cf. Mark 1:6). John, who went out to the wilderness to prepare the way (cf. Mark 1:2-4). John, who went down to the river (cf. Mark 1:5).

Things were different this time around. This time God really was at hand. This time God was coming back. *He's just around the corner*, John said. *He's coming along after me. I baptize you with water, but just you wait. Just you wait. The one coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (cf. Mark 1:7-8).

Centuries had passed. And the waiting was over, nearly over. God was about to appear to his people. And there would be no mistaking it! Well, that's not quite true. Even John would wonder if his enthusiasm had gotten the better of him (cf. Matthew 11:3). Still, whether he caught on precisely or not, John was right.

And after him, Jesus came. Jesus, the one Israel had been waiting for all along. Jesus, the one we're waiting for again, waiting for still today, waiting longer than Israel ever waited, waiting, it seems, forever.

AND WHAT STORY DO WE TELL OURSELVES about the waiting? And what do we do with ourselves while we wait? Two thousand years ago, a waiting people went down to the river. Was there another place for them to go? Is there another place for us to go?

Down to the river. Down to the waters of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Down to the waters that lead from the wilderness, with its story of wandering and waiting – down to the waters that lead from the wilderness to the kingdom of God, to the place where all our waiting will be ended.

Down to the river we go. We go there to come clean. We go there to own up to our pride, our envy, our anger, our despair, our greed, our gluttony, our lust. We go there to

confess that we're not as bothered by our sin as we should be, that there are certain sins we're quite content to hang on to. We go there to leave behind a way of life that deflates our spirits and dries up our souls.

Down to the river we go. We go there to immerse ourselves in what God is bringing. We go there to welcome the kingdom of God, to be a part of that kingdom. We go there to embrace our baptism with its promise of new life, a life free from the tyranny of the devil and all the powers. We go there to step into a stream of time that has been redefined by God's promises and by God's presence.

Not that the waiting is over. Not that what we hope for has arrived. Not that we aren't regularly disappointed by the way things go on and on without change.

But we wait in faith. We wait clinging to what God gives us. Clinging to what comes our way from the other side of the river. Not the wilderness side, but the home-at-last side. We cling to the Holy Spirit, sent to us by Jesus. The Spirit is a first installment of sorts, guaranteeing everything that God has in store.

And we cling to the morsels that our Lord feeds us at his table. We call it a feast. Honestly it's not much of a feast. Except this small meal of ours, this little taste of bread and wine, this is a foretaste of the great feast to come. If you will, these are crumbs and droplets fallen from the master's banquet table. Not enough to fill us up. But enough for us to remember and believe by the grace of God. Enough for us to remember and believe while we wait. And waiting is what we do. In Advent. Always.