ENDURING THE UNKNOWN

**Waiting Series (Part 1) | Genesis 12 & 15; Luke 2:25-38**

Like a lot of you, I imagine, I spent this past Thanksgiving holiday in the company of my family. About thirty of us came from all over the United States to gather at my parents’ place in Connecticut for a lot of feasting and fun. One of the highlights for me on this trip was the chance to interact with my youngest nephew, Abe, which is short for Abraham. Abe is short too! He’s a four-year-old with this wild mop of very blonde hair and the kind of self-confidence that will make him a very successful adult or land him in jail. The jury’s out on that! I took this picture as Abe attempted to whip his six-foot seven-inch cousin in ping-pong. The chair he’s standing on helped!

At one point during the holiday, Abe came to me and moaned in the most pitiable way: “Uncle Dan, I can’t WAIT any longer.” “What are you waiting for, Abe?” I asked. “I’m waiting for my *snack*,” he said, blue eyes welling up with tears. “I’ve been *waiting,* so long and I’m tired of it!” I’ll confess that I was a bit amused because his mouth was ringed with chocolate, suggesting he might not have been waiting that long! But it precipitated a bit of a mini-crisis for me. Would I be doing Abe a bigger favor by getting up and going to the snack cabinet on his behalf? Or would I be helping him more if I just sat with him while he learned to wait? What do you think?

From the time we are very young to the time when we are very old, you and I spend a lot of time, WAITING, don’t we? We wait for Christmas to come and for the snow to go. We wait for the summer to start and for school to begin. We wait for the microwave to ding or the doorbell to ring. We wait for the check to arrive or our investments to thrive. We wait for the mate to be found, for the wedding to come, for the house to be done. We wait for the train to appear or the traffic to clear or that date to come near. We wait for the tests to come back… for the therapy to work… for the job to be offered… for the package to arrive… for the answer to be given… for the journey to end. Think how much of your life is spent in waiting. What are YOU waiting for now? I bet it’s for more than a snack.

Maybe it’s because waiting is such a common part of human life that the Bible tells a lot of stories about people who wait. Over the next few weeks we’re going to look at a bunch of those stories and what they have to teach us. Today I want to share with you one tale from the Old Testament book of Genesis and one from the New Testament book of Luke. The first story is about another Abe – actually the original Abraham after whom my young nephew was named. If there are poster children for the experience of waiting it has to be Father Abraham and his wife Sarah, about whom we read in the Book of Genesis, chapter 12 and following.

Genesis 12:1reads: **The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”** It isn’t in the text, but I can easily imagine Abraham and Sarah saying in response to this instruction: “You want us to leave this good place and go WHERE? Can you tell us a bit more about where you’re sending us? Can you describe what this place is like and how we’ll make a life there?” And God says, in effect: “Ah, you’ll need to WAIT on that. Just go and I’ll show you.”

Then God says to Abraham and Sarah: **“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing… and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen 12:2)** God is making amazing promises here. He’s saying that he’s going to create a massive family through this couple and that one day through their lineage will come a child who will bring blessing to all the people of this earth. God is telling this couple about the coming of the Christ Child at Christmas -- two-thousand years before it happens. Again, you can imagine the questions that Abraham and Sarah have: “Um, Lord, how’s that going to work? How are we going to be the parents of a massive nation? We don’t even have one kid yet and we’re in our seventies! And, once more, God’s basic response is: “Just wait. I’ll show you.” “And when will that happen?” God says: *“Keep waiting.”*

By Genesis chapter 15, Abraham and Sarah are running out of patience. They’ve done a lot of traveling since chapter 12. They’ve left a very cushy home in a place called Ur (which is modern day Iraq) and walked all the way to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. And then, when faced by a famine, they’ve traveled down into Egypt and eventually back up north again. It is STILL not clear where their new home is going to be or if and how and when they’ll ever have a child. So, with much more justification than my four-year-old nephew, Abraham says, in effect: *“I’ve been WAITING so long and I’m tired of it!”* The text literally reads: **Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?” (Gen 15:2)** And while we’re on the topic, you’ve promised us not just a child but a real home in a good land in which to raise that child, so **“Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” (Gen 15:8).** And God says, in effect: *“Keep waiting.”*

As I read those passages this week, I was particularly struck by how Abraham addresses God. Did you notice what he calls him? In each instance, as he is expressing his anguish and exhaustion over waiting, Abraham calls God, **“Sovereign Lord.”** Because it’s not a word we use every day, I looked up that term “sovereign” in a few dictionaries and here’s what I found. The Miriam-Webster Dictionary says that SOVEREIGN means: *relating to, characteristic of, or befitting a supreme ruler*.The Cambridge Dictionary says that SOVEREIGN means*having the highest power or being completely independent.* In other words, to say that our Lord God is sovereign is to say that he is supreme and in charge… that he is qualified and able to use his might power to accomplish his purposes, independent of our counsel or our correction.

Whether it is Abraham and Sarah or you and me speaking, it is one thing to say that we have a Sovereign Lord, but quite another thing to be comfortable with that. In a sense, every experience of WAITING that we have in this life is an invitation (if not outright challenge) to recognize that God is sovereign and we are not. I love how Anglican pastor, Tish Harrison Warren, illuminates this in her book, LITURGY OF THE ORDINARY. Warren describes getting stuck in one of those highway traffic jams where you look on the GPS map and see one of those long red lines stretching out forever. You know what that’s like! Here's what Tish writes…

“My kids are strapped into their car seats kicking the seats in front of them in boredom. We are all a little tired and… whiny. It’s hot in the car… We need to get home soon or my kids will be cranky—'starving,’ they’ll say. They’ll get a late bath and be late for bed, and there goes my hope of a little downtime. As I wait, I grow increasingly irritated. I’ve never really understood why people honk in traffic. No one can go any faster. We’re all stuck. No one’s particularly happy about it. But people honk, as if to shake a sonic fist at the sky. In the face of our powerlessness, our stuckness, our mortal minutes counting down, we just honk: an act of rage and protest that only adds noise, not movement.”

“I judge the people who honk in traffic, but if my feelings made sounds, they’d be honking too. I am impatient. I live in an instant world where I like to think I am the captain of the clock. I live with the illusion that time—my time at least—is something I control… [or should control]. When my computer moves too slowly—seconds really—I murmur, ‘This is taking forever.’ …We are impatient people. We want happiness now. Fulfillment and gratification now. Time is just another commodity that we seek to maximize. I get angry in traffic because it reminds me that time is not at my bidding.”

Of course, if I knew how long I have left to live, if the length of my remaining days or those of someone close to me could be counted in weeks, I’d understand that time is not in my control...” In other words and deep down, Warren understands that she is not SOVEREIGN but there is Someone who is. She continues: *Every day I wait. I wait for help, for healing, for days to come, for rescue and redemption. Like all of us, I’m waiting to die. And [I’m waiting] for glory, for the coming King, for the resurrection of the body. Christians are people who wait.”* [[1]](#endnote-1)

In other words, to be a Christian is to understand that we live in the time in-between the ALREADY of what God has said and done and the NOT YET of what he will ultimately birth and the glorious land he will take us to one day. This is the space that Abraham and Sarah lived in, honked about, and ultimately chose to trust the Sovereign Lord in. Advent invites us to join them in this. It is the season of the year when we are called to remember that Christ has come, and he will come again, and that in the meantime, it’s OK to be a bit frustrated as we learn to wait for the gifts and resolutions each of us longs for.

I don’t know how all of this lands with you but I want to ask you a personal question: Where do YOU find the strength to endure when what you hope for
seems so long in coming or you fear may never come at all? There’s a wonderful story in the New Testament that offers some help with this and moves us toward a close. Hear God’s Word with me as it comes to us from the Gospel According to Luke: **Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was WAITING for the consolation of Israel... (Luke 2:25)**That phrase, “the consolation of Israel” means the completion of the promise that God had made two thousand years before that God would bring forth through the bloodline of Abraham and Sarah a child who would bring blessings not just to Israel but to people of every nation. For **It had been revealed to [Simeon] by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah (Luke 2:26).**

Talk about being stuck in traffic or getting tired of WAITING for snack time, Israel had been waiting two millennia for the fulfillment of God’s promise. Simeon, now an old man, had been waiting his whole life. Think how much whining, groaning and honking there had been along the way. And, then, it happened. **Moved by the Spirit, [Simeon] went into the temple courts.** Suddenly, a young peasant couple enter the temple carrying their infant child. The mother is very young. The father has the calloused hands of a tradesman. The baby is about ten months old. His parents have come **to do for him what the custom of the Law required (Luke 2:27)**, which is to say they have come to dedicate their son to God and to his purposes.And by the power of the Holy Spirit that fills him, Simeon KNOWS. The WAITING is over. The traffic has cleared. Not just a snack but the Great Banquet is now being set. The promise to Abraham has been completely fulfilled. This child is the consolation of Israel. He is the blessing beyond blessing. He is the Light that can lead the whole world back to its Creator.

I just love the text that follows. It makes me think of every time I’ve had the joyful privilege of baptizing a special child. **Simeon took him in his arms and praised God… (Luke 2:28)** And then I want you to especially notice how Simeon goes on to address God,because I couldn’t make this up and you’ve heard it before on the lips of Abraham two-thousand years before. Simeon says: **Sovereign Lord…** supreme ruler… highest power… independent God who is in charge of when the blessing we long for finally comes… **as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. (Luke 2:29) For my eyes have seen your salvation,which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” (Luke 2:30-32)**

This is such an amazing story and has so much to say to you and me and anyone who finds it hard today to be WAITING when life seems stuck on neutral. Let me pull out four brief takeaways for all of us and then let you go.

First, because God has made human beings to exercise a stewarding dominion over the affairs of this earth, it is natural for us to want to manage, control and schedule things. When we can’t compel the outcomes or results that we consider good, it is only natural that we do a little bit of groaning and honking. God can take that. If you think I’m being heretical, read the Psalms.

Secondly, and at the same time, we would be wise not to give in to a lifestyle of honking and whining. It is important to remember that we are NOT the Sovereign Lord. The snack we want may not be good for us. The traffic we feel stuck in may well be part of a much larger pattern of God’s providence. God who IS sovereign truly knows what is best for us. He will DELIVER it on the schedule that he deems right. And every experience of WAITING we have is an invitation to recall this.

At the end of Luke 2 there is another little story that I think is profoundly instructive. We read: **There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.** Women in the first century usually married in their early teens. Let’s suppose Anna married at fourteen and lived with her husband till he died when she was twenty-one. That means that Anna was a widow for sixty-three years in a world where being a widow was unthinkably hard. How did Anna endure this long period of waiting for her consolation? The Bible gives us a clue: **She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.** I think there’s a lesson for us here. If you are looking to find the strength to endure the outworking of God’s unknown providence, seek communion with God and community with his people.

Back in 2004, I came across a website that was simply called “Waiting.com.” It’s since been discontinued but it was an online space for people with a loved one lying in a coma. Sprinkled throughout the site were the reflections of souls waiting for that phone call that tells them their beloved has miraculously awoken or mercifully died. Where, I wondered, does someone find the capacity to keep waiting like that, when the outcome is unknown and uncertain? The notes on the website testified that those waiting people were finding the strength by seeking communion with God and community with one another.

At the end of the day, our hope lies not in relying on God to supply what we want; it comes from relying on God to supply us with Himself. And that’s the message of Christmas -- “Emmanuel” – God is with us. As he was with Abraham and Sarah and Simeon and Anna, God is with us in all the ways we wait for what is NOT YET and, as Anna discovered, an encounter with Jesus is our heart’s greatest consolation.   So, if you are finding the WAITING particularly hard right now, you’ve come to the right Person and to the right People to find the support and strength you need. Keep seeking this communion and community until the traffic clears and the banquet is served and you know beyond doubt that your patient enduring was worth the wait.

1. Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, chapter 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)