

July 29, 2018
10th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Wait For It”

The Rev Amy Starr Redwine



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Note: During our summer series, "Word," members of the Covenant family will choose a scripture passage and share how it has been or become God's Word for them.

Isaiah 40:31

31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Reflection by: Jenny Conner

Isaiah 40:31 was the first anthem text I set to music for the Covenant choir when I started worshiping here as a graduate composition student. Balancing as many as seven different jobs to finance my doctoral studies while simultaneously devoting the necessary time to both academic and creative work was physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. The promise of renewed strength and the image of soaring with eagles was regenerative and comforting to me. In the years that have followed, however, I have come to appreciate even more the opening line of this text, the meaning of which I had brushed over in my earlier school years: They that wait upon the Lord. Aimed at the Israelites in captivity who had endured a long time of persecution, this text promised God's eventual comfort and renewal. But first, they had to wait. To hold on. To trust. Like many, my life has had times of intense wilderness wandering, times where I have felt lost or persecuted. Times when God seemed distant. The most recent occurred about a decade ago, when difficult changes and challenges at both of my teaching institutions at the same time, coupled with changes within the church and a loss of my ministry to the children, left me feeling diminished, and vulnerable. The loss of my composition mentor and the near loss of my mother that year deepened my sense of isolation. My sense of self-worth shattered, and it was a long, slow climb out of that particular wilderness. Faced with the choice offered by Job's friends to curse God and walk away, I chose instead to cling tenaciously to the promise of God's love and to wait. It was a long and gradual journey back, but God gently led me to a renewed, deeper sense of self-ready to mount up once more on the wings of Eagles

Wait For It

One of the formative experiences of writer Ernest Hemingway's life was getting injured while working as an ambulance driver during the First World War. Doctors pulled two hundred and thirty-seven pieces of shrapnel from his body, and he spent six months recovering in a hospital. During that time, like all good writers, he became a keen observer of what was happening around him, and he became fascinated by the different ways various patients waited for their battle wounds to heal. As they endured a period of recovery that at times seemed endless, some distracted themselves, some cried out in lament, and others quietly pondered what their situation would mean for their lives and their futures. Tom Long observes that this experience seems to have lodged itself into Hemingway's psyche, for when he began writing his novels, the plotlines often centered around someone who was waiting: waiting to fight in a war, waiting for a bull to charge, waiting to be rescued at sea. There is no denying that waiting is part of the human experience, from the trivial – waiting for a stoplight to turn green or waiting in line at a store to the profound – waiting to be rescued, waiting for healing, waiting to find love, waiting to die.

It should be no surprise, then, that the Bible is full of stories of people who are waiting. Think of Abram and Sarai, waiting to have their promised child; the Israelites, waiting to be freed from slavery in Egypt and then wandering for forty years in the wilderness as they waited to enter the Promised Land. David, waiting for his turn to be Israel's king; God's people, oppressed and marginalized, waiting for the promised Messiah; the disciples, waiting to figure out who this Jesus was and whether following him had been a good idea; the early church, waiting for the coming of Christ's kingdom for which we wait still. What Hemingway learned about waiting is what we see in all of these biblical stories and in our own lives: waiting does not break us or shape us, waiting reveals us.¹ How we respond to our unique experiences of waiting reveals something about who we are.

Scholars typically divide the book of Isaiah into three distinct parts. Chapter 40, from which today's verse came, begins the second part. In this fifteen-chapter section, Isaiah offers words of comfort to the Israelites who have been taken into exile by the Babylonians. This portion of Isaiah is addressed to people who are strangers in a strange land, refugees living far from home, held captive by a

¹ Tom Long, "What Waiting Reveals about Our True Selves," *The Christian Century*. Nov. 4, 2016.

hostile regime that destroyed and occupied their land. This was a people who had begun to question God's promises, to wonder if God cared about them, to ask whether God was even there at all a people who were waiting. Some of the passages in this section of Isaiah are the most beloved and most often-quoted passages of the Bible, and we often hear them during Advent, that season of waiting built into our liturgical year. We hear these passages as we prepare for Christmas because they speak of God's promised Messiah and because they offer profound and poetic words of comfort to people who are waiting for God to be revealed.

Isaiah knows something about waiting. He knows that waiting especially waiting through a period of uncertainty and suffering erodes hope even as it fuels doubt. But Isaiah also seems to know that waiting can be fertile ground or spiritual growth because it often opens us up enough to learn a few things.

Michael Scott Moore is a journalist who traveled to Somalia to research and write a book on the history of piracy in the Horn of Africa. But he hadn't been there long when he himself was kidnapped by a band of armed pirates who held him captive for two years and eight months. In the book that he eventually wrote about this experience, *The Desert, and the Sea*, he writes, "Hope is like heroin to a hostage, and it can be just as destructive." When asked about this line in an interview, he elaborated: "Hope was a cycle, and after a while, it became a destructive cycle. People say, 'How did you hang onto hope for two years and eight months?' And the fact is: I didn't. I learned to live without hope. So having your hopes raised and then dashed every two weeks, which is what the guards tried to do...was devastating. It was actually no way to live. And so I had to find a different level of existing. And it turns out you can live without hope. ... [because] hope and despair are just two ways of approaching...an uncertain future. And if you ... simply don't think forward toward the future, and don't insist on a rosy outlook for the next couple of weeks or months or years, then you can live in the moment. That's what I had to learn to do. I would have snapped if I had done it any other way."²

Moore learned that when hope is only directed toward the future, it can actually be harmful when your hopes get dashed over and over again. So his experience of waiting taught him the importance of living in the present

² <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/24/631941716/what-its-like-to-be-held-hostage-by-somali-pirates-for-2-1-2-years>

moment. It also taught him the importance of relationships. Moore says that if he has to identify something positive about his years of captivity, it was the time he spent at sea on a ship with other hostages because these other people became his friends. With other people around, he wasn't just focused on the misery of his own situation; he was able to focus more on the present and take comfort in relationships.

Isaiah does not address individuals, but all of God's people, collectively. He calls us, especially in seasons of waiting or seasons of suffering, to help each other remember and cling to God's promises, which are not just for the future but which are manifest in the present moment, every time we draw breath. In the verse Jenny picked out, Isaiah reminds the exiles that they can take comfort in one another. He does this by identifying three different groups of people who will be strengthened by God: those who will mount up with wings like eagles, in other words, the strongest among them who will be able to do extraordinary things. But also those who will run and not grow weary those who will be able to continue to make good progress on their journeys. Finally, there are those who will be able to walk and not faint those who can barely put one foot in front of the other but who will nevertheless keep moving forward. What Isaiah describes in this one verse is a diverse community of people who move forward by the grace of God at different speeds and with different capabilities, but who move forward together.

What is revealed throughout the Bible and throughout our lives, is that waiting especially waiting for the promises of God, which so often seem distant and uncertain is made more bearable when we wait in a community this. After all, is what the first churches were all about, groups of people waiting together for God's kingdom, which they had glimpsed in Jesus, to be fully revealed.

Before the verse Jenny chose, Isaiah takes the time to remind us of God's power and presence in the world and our lives. "Have you not known," Isaiah writes, "Have you not heard?... It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing." Isaiah knows that one of the ways we are present to God moment to moment, especially during a difficult season of waiting, is to notice the beauty and majesty and wonder of the natural world God created.

This lesson is articulated in Wendell Berry's poem, "The Peace of Wild Things."
*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound...
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*³

Isaiah reminds God's people that in every moment, we are free to rest in the grace of God's extraordinary world: the stars and the planets; the seas and the mountains; the plants and the animals who do not worry about tomorrow.

All around us, within and beyond these walls, people are waiting. People are waiting and wondering: will God ever show up to fulfill God's promises? Does God even care that we are suffering? Does God see that we are floundering?

People within and beyond these walls wonder whether God will heal the pain and division in our church and in our country. People in the surrounding medical centers are desperate or healing or even for a peaceful end for themselves or a loved one. People across our city, mourning lives lost to gang and gun violence, are hoping against hope for peace to be restored. People across the border are longing to be reunited with their children.

All around us, within and beyond these walls, people are waiting. **We** are waiting. And while we wait, even while waiting erodes hope and fuels doubt, may today's words from Isaiah pierce our spiritual amnesia. May they remind us that in the midst of our waiting and our longing and our doubt, God is revealed to us in each moment, in the wonder and majesty of the world around us, and in the relationships, we cultivate with one another, relationships that comfort us and strengthen us while we wait...for God to come and make all things new.

Amen.

³ Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems* (North Point Press), 1985.