

“No End in Sight”
Isaiah 40:21-31; Romans 8:22-25
5th Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
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I realized, this past week, that it’s been a while since I gave you an update about our dog.

I can tell...you’ve been missing the stories about her, right?
Can’t wait to hear about her, can you?

You know about this dog.
This dog that, many days, drives me up the wall.

You’ve heard me tell you about how she likes to dig holes in the backyard, which end up being right by our sprinkler heads, costing a few hundred dollars in the spring for us to repair.

Her latest move is to start barking uncontrollably at random dogs and neighbors while we’re on a walk. She did not used to do this. And then one day...she just started doing it.

It’s not every dog or every person.
It’s just random people.

There was a sermon, I don’t know how many years ago it was, when I just flat out asked y’all: does anyone want a dog?

Does anyone want a dog?
I’m losing patience with our dog.
I mean, I love her—I think—but I’m losing patience with her behavior, you know what I mean?

If we knew that x and y would change her behavior, we would do it.

So recently I took her to the vet, got some medication for her.
Maybe this will calm her down.
We've got to give it some time.
See how the medication works.
Don't worry, I'll let you know whether or not it works.

I think the part of the problem—not with her, but with me—is that there doesn't seem to be a finish line with this.

And I'm the kind of person who likes a finish line.
You know what I mean?
I think you do.

How many of you have ever been in the hospital, or had a loved one in the hospital before?

When a loved one is in the hospital, what really helps—is seeing the finish line.

When the doctor tells you: tomorrow.
Tomorrow you can go back home!
Tomorrow you can have a home cooked meal.
It's easier to make it through something...when the finish line is in sight.

It happens in all aspects of life.

The student who has the last day of school memorized in their mind. The teacher who has the last day of school memorized in her mind.

We all need a finish line, something to look forward to...

All of which brings me to our text for today.
Our text from the prophet Isaiah.
Do you know who Isaiah is writing to in this passage?

Not to someone in the hospital.
Not a teacher or a student waiting for the next vacation.

He's writing to people in EXILE.

More to the point, he's writing to people could not see the finish line—or better yet, he's writing to a people who *didn't know whether a finish line even existed*.

We're in the 40th chapter of Isaiah. The Israelites are in Babylon. And they've been there not just one year, not for a few years...does anyone remember how many years the Israelites were in exile?

Over 50 years.

Over half a century of wondering when God will deliver you, when God will rescue you, when God will return you to the Promised Land at last.

It's enough wondering and waiting...to give up on God!

So Isaiah writes:

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

“He...strengthens the powerless.”

“Even youths will faint and be weary,” Isaiah writes, “and the young will fall exhausted; 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.”

Who is it who will run and not be weary, walk and not faint?
Not those who fight for the Lord, not those who win for the Lord.

Those who **wait** for the Lord.
It is faith...not as production.
But faith...as patience.

We are continuing our sermon series today, “The Fabric of Faith,” and that’s the topic we’re examining:

faith as waiting.

Faith as patience...

How good are you at waiting?

If any of you enjoy it, like it, and would consider yourself an expert in waiting, please see me after worship today, because I will hire you to be my personal tutor.

I’m not a fan of waiting.

You see, I’d rather preach a sermon about how and when it’s UNFAITHFUL to wait.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words from a Birmingham city jail ring in my ears.

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion,” King wrote, “that [our] great stumbling block...is not...the Ku Klux Klaner, but the

white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice...who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advise[s] [us] to wait...”¹

You see, I’d much rather preach a sermon about why we CANNOT wait. In the face of bigotry or xenophobia or unrestrained greed, we cannot wait to stand up for what is right.

We cannot wait to address the polarization in our society. To try to make sure that the vitriol out there does not seep into our church community here.

I would rather preach that sermon.
I find it harder to preach this sermon.
A sermon...about waiting.

It’s always been this way.
Even before I entered ministry.

One of my favorite high school teachers, on one of my letters of recommendation for college—under the part that said, list any weaknesses of the applicant—she wrote, “Ben can be, at times, a quietly impatient person.”

It’s true!

Maybe part of the problem is that the Bible tells story after story about faith as patience.

About people who were required to wait.
And they did it!

Take Abraham.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, New York: HarperCollins, 1986.

Do you recall how old Abraham was when God first told him that God would make of him a great nation?

75 years old.

And how old was Abraham when Isaac was finally born?

100 years old.

What's 100 minus 75?

Y'all are math whizzes.

That's 25 years of waiting for God to fulfill God's promise.

Have you ever seen someone faithfully wait?

It's a remarkable thing.

Next Sunday is the 34th anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release from a South African prison, after 27 years of waiting.

On February 11, 1990,

it surprised some who watched those remarkable events—

that Mandela **walked** from the prison—

rather than being driven by car.

But it was the act of a patient man.

His long walk toward the crowds

mirrored his long walk to freedom

and that of his people.

By walking he echoed that his freedom wouldn't come

without the release of his people.

He reiterated the solidarity he'd shown throughout the previous decade when he refused to be set free—
 even though he was offered to be set free—
 unless his release coincided with political change.

In his speech that day Mandela said, *'Our march to freedom is irreversible.'*

Mandela knew that he did not walk alone.
 He walked with God.

And on the strength of that faith...he reached out to the WHOLE population.

Mandela said, *'We call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa.'*

He described his arch-opponent, President F.W. de Klerk, as a 'man of integrity.'

What an extraordinary statement of magnanimity
 towards a person who, together with his predecessors,
 had kept Mandela in prison for ten thousand days.²

How did he demonstrate that kind of grace?
 Do you think perhaps he learned it through all those years of struggle and waiting?

I may not like to wait, you may not like to wait, but waiting may just have something to teach each of us as well.

² I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Mark Ramsey, "Wait For It," preached at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, North Carolina, on November 2, 2014, for this reference to Nelson Mandela.

Any one of us can practice it.
Any one of us can make waiting and patience...
a daily practice of our faith.

I remember the time, back in Dallas, when I went to visit another pastor in the Presbytery.

He was retired, and he was in an assisted living facility,
because he had suffered a stroke.

This once-vibrant pastor who had served as the stated Clerk of the Presbytery could no longer speak intelligibly, could not swallow, and received nourishment through a feeding tube.

It was heartbreaking.
But what I saw in his room almost took my breath away.

I don't mean the symptoms of the stroke.
I mean who else was there.

His wife was in the room.
She had health difficulties of her own, but she was there.

And a member of his former church was there.
This member was part of a rotating shift of members from that church.

They would come in...and sit...and stay.
They couldn't do much.
All they could do is talk to him, and hold his hand, and share memories, and tell him that they loved him.

He would not respond.
No one knew what kind of difference their presence made.

But the congregation kept that rotation going.
Day after day, week after week.

They trusted that by their PRESENCE,
as well as their PATIENCE...
God would give their former pastor a gift.

A gift that they could not control or predict or foresee.

How are you...with waiting?

You see, the question is not whether we like to wait.
And the question is not whether we will wait.
The question is...how will we do it?

At some point, life will take an unexpected turn for each of us.
And when that moment occurs, and God is failing to show up in the way
that we wished God would show up...how will we wait?

Will we get impatient, and try to regain control?
Or will we trust in the goodness and grace of God?

Will we trust in God's promise to give us a gift—
a gift that we cannot predict, or plan, or foresee?

A number of years ago, Jean Jeffery Gietzen wrote a brief essay
reminiscing about her father.

She said that when she was young, she was very close to her
father. The time she experienced this closeness the most was when they
would have big family gatherings, with all the aunts and uncles and
cousins.

At some point, someone would pull out the old record player and put on polka records, and the family would dance.

Eventually, someone would put on the “Beer Barrel Polka,” and when the music of the “Beer Barrel Polka” played, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder, and say, “I believe this is our dance.”

And Jean would dance with her father.

One time, though, when she was a teenager and in a mood, the Beer Barrel Polka began to play, and her father tapped her on the shoulder and said,

“I believe this is our dance”—

And she snapped back at him, *“Don’t touch me!
Leave me alone!”*

And her father turned away and did not ask her to dance again.

“Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years,” she wrote.

“When I would come home late from a date,
my father would be sitting there in his chair,
half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe—
and I would snarl at him:
“What do you think you’re doing?””

He would look at me with sad eyes and say, “I was just waiting on you.”

“When I went away to college, I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him, and for years I never communicated with him...but as I grew older, I began to miss him.

“One day I decided to go to the next family gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on the Beer Barrel Polka.

THEN, years of inward and outward struggle culminated in the moment when I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, “I believe this is our dance.”

He turned toward me and said:
*“Oh yes...I’ve been waiting on you.”*³

You see, waiting is not just frustration.
 Or a source of boredom.
 It’s also a gift.
 It’s how we remember our dependence and our TRUST on the goodness and grace of the living God.

When you entered the sanctuary today—God said:
 “Oh yes...I’ve been waiting for you.”

How many of you brought your iPhones with you?
 How many of you keep your calendar on your iPhone?
 How many of you would like me to wrap this sermon up so that you can get to the next thing on that calendar?

Don’t answer that.
 Answer this.

³ This story appears in one of the “Chicken Soup for the Soul” books. I learned of this story in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Tom Long, “Is There Joy in God’s House?”, March 21, 2004, found at http://day1.org/471-is_there_joy_in_gods_house.

How many of you brought your trust in the goodness and grace of God with you this morning?

I hope so.

Because God has a gift for you.

A gift you cannot predict or plan or control or foresee....

Amen.