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Waiting in Hope

2 Peter 3:13

The experience of waiting is at the heart of our human existence. One observer has described how we are shaped by waiting in these words:

In a profound sense it is true that we spend our lives waiting for something or someone. As children we wait eagerly for the day when we shall go to school and then, perhaps with even greater eagerness for the day when we shall leave school. We wait for the day when we can begin our life's work ... We wait for the day when we shall be married, for the birth of our children. We wait, sometimes apprehensively for the day when the children will no longer need us ... We wait for the day when we shall retire from work, and perhaps we dread that day because we fear that when it comes there will be nothing more for which to wait, but then comes the waiting for grandchildren. Always there seems to be something to wait for, or at least we hope there will always be something for which to wait. Otherwise we might as well be dead (Stuart McWilliam, Journal for Preachers, Advent 2002, pages 13-14).

This advent season is a particular time of waiting for Westminster Church. Much of what we have done over the past year has been in anticipation of the transition that will take place in the Spring. Our Co-Pastor Nominating Committee has been fully engaged in the task of inviting ministers to consider the opportunity presented by this congregation. Through their interaction with ministers who are interested in our church they are carefully discerning the leadership of God's Spirit to identify the one who is the right fit for this position.

Because pastor nominating committees do their work with a high degree of confidentiality, congregations often feel closed off from the process. They tend to become impatient with the length of time required for a pastoral search. The time of preparation and anticipation all too easily slides into a time of anxiety. Waiting becomes a burden. Or in the words of W.H. Auden, "the time being" is always the most difficult of all.

In the fourth chapter of Mark's gospel John the Baptist appears to a people for whom waiting has become a great burden. The people of Israel had been waiting for centuries for the fulfillment of God's promises. In times of triumph and tragedy, success and failure the people had looked forward to the coming of a messiah who would usher in a new age of justice and peace. For those who gather in the wilderness to hear John the Baptist that new age seems more remote than ever before. They are living under the brutal occupation of a Roman army. There is no justice in their land. The measure of peace that they know comes at a terrible price. They are living in a wilderness where there is no place for hope.

It is in this wilderness that they meet John the Baptist. John invites them to see their wilderness in a different way. He wants them to experience this wilderness as a place to prepare for the emergence of the new world for which they have been waiting. In the wilderness they can envision that new world

which is based on the compassion and justice of God. Here they can experience repentance as their lives are turned around by this vision. John wants them to know that they can be shaped by the reality for which they wait. The theologian Paul Tillich said it like this:

Although waiting is not having, it is also having. The fact that we wait for something shows that in some way we already possess it ... waiting anticipates that which is not yet real. If we wait and hope in patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us(The Shaking of the Foundations).

This process is described in the letter of 2 Peter. The letter is written to a people who have given up waiting for the fulfillment of God's purposes. They have decided that God no longer participates in human history. They have grown tired of living in the interim between the appearance of Christ and establishment of the new age of justice and peace. This interim has become a wilderness in which they have lost hope. But the writer of 2 Peter calls his people to have patience during their time of waiting. He reminds them that God doesn't live by human calendars. God works by compassion rather than schedules. They should not give up on God because God never gives up on us.

The source of their patience is the truth that God's compassion and justice are already at work in them. They are being shaped by "the new heavens and new earth where righteousness is at home (2 Peter 3:13)." Their lives are being transformed by the reality for which they wait. Living in this interim time is not a threat or a burden. It is a part of God's redemptive activity in their midst.

A seminary student came to understand this truth in a compelling way when she and her husband were living apart during the week and together on the weekends. She was studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York while her husband worked for a law firm in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Each Friday he would arrive by train at Penn Station just in time for a late supper. She said:

I would usually get up early on Friday to clean the apartment before class. Then, after classes, I would make a kind of safari down Broadway. I would stop for groceries, pick up a bottle of wine, stop at a favorite flower stall for fresh flowers; and when I got home, I had just enough time to get myself and supper ready. Then John would come. The funny thing about it was that from morning until he arrived I always had this strange feeling that he was already with me – not really – but really(Journal for Preachers, Advent 2005, page 25).

That is the message of Advent. Scripture tells us that we can always wait in hope because the one for whom we wait already has a place in our hearts.