

Waiting for God

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Readings:

On Joy and Sorrow, Kahil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that hold your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?

And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

Verily you are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy.

Only when you are empty are you at standstill and balanced.

When the treasure-keeper lifts you to weigh his gold and his silver, needs must your joy or your sorrow rise or fall.

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope.

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing.

Wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing.

There is yet faith, but the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought.

So the darkness shall be the light and the stillness the dancing.

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

On His Blindness, by John Milton

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

Isaiah 40:21-31

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? ²⁸Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. ²⁹He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹but 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.

Chris and Kit have decided that our focus for Advent is going to be joy. Pure joy. Plain and simple. We're going to give hope, peace and love a miss this year for Advent, but we're also going to give up, for the next four weeks anyway, our ancient Hebrew-like penchant for complaining. It was typical, wasn't it?, of the ancient Hebrews to complain rather than rejoice? It is typical of us also, I think. But we have, and they had, reason perhaps.

Many of us have spent a good number of years having someone beat us about the head and shoulders with a giant, 24 pages of genealogy between the testaments, black leather bound, gold gilt edged paged, bible, and maybe we have a few legitimate complaints to voice to the God worshipped by our tormenters. Some of us, like Job, have endured hardships and heartbreak, and, like Job, we refuse to keep silent. We raise our voices loudly against the injustices of life. As Gibran points out in *The Prophet*, sorrow and joy are just different ends of the same spectrum. Without one, the other can't exist. But we have plenty of time for complaining and Advent certainly seems to be an appropriate season for joy.

Advent is also, traditionally, a season of waiting. Before Americans decided that Advent was really Christmas, it was a season of quiet joy, anticipating the coming celebration of incarnation. Advent was a time for waiting for birth. For those of you who have a child, I think the metaphor is good. Just as we anticipate the birth of the Christ child during advent, the wait is similar to the anticipation of the birth of any child. The expectation, the happiness, the process. Feeling the quickening of the child in the womb, the wonder, the anxiety, the love, the fear. Advent is waiting.

But I have to confess: the process and the emotion do not mesh well for me. Waiting and joy are not usual companions in my world. Waiting for me is almost always some minor reenactment of the line at the DMV. It isn't joyful. It's usually just barely tolerable. It doesn't make me feel peaceful or happy. Waiting is an early Saturday morning in a strange high school classroom waiting for the proctor to say I can begin taking the SAT. Waiting is the week after a stress test or a colonoscopy. Waiting is sending an email at work asking for necessary information and never getting a response. Occasionally, I get a break and waiting is less anxiety ridden and frustrating. Ordering a book from Barnes & Noble. Cooking rice. Planting beans.

For the last several weeks I've been trying to figure out whether waiting itself is useful and, as odd as it might sound, whether waiting itself could be joyful. I believe that feminist thought (at least that from the 80s and early 90s) may be helpful in understanding waiting as an end and as joyful. I believe that I have some understanding of the concept that waiting as a process does not have to be dependent on the goal of the waiting. The joy of waiting does not necessarily have to be tied to what we are waiting for. I understand that as a concept, but as someone pointed out to me, waiting is something of a transitive concept.

I think waiting falls into two primary categories (but forgive me if I'm overlooking something). We are either knowingly waiting for something we expect, or we are waiting quite unknown to ourselves for something we do not know is coming. The first category is painfully obvious, I suppose. We wait for guests to arrive. We wait for test scores to be posted. We wait for a diagnosis.

The second category is vague. I've heard people use the phrase, "I've been waiting for this all my life..." in many contexts. In many situations when I've heard this phrase used, it is used in the second category. For instance, I had a friend when I lived in New York who met a man on her 35th birthday and fell head over heels in love (whatever that is). And she said it: "I've been waiting for him all my life." Well. Maybe. But she didn't know she was waiting for him, did she? She didn't know about him until she met him. And I don't think she was waiting even for the idea of him. She was living her life and she met him and once she met him she reinterpreted her life prior to their meeting as a period of waiting for him.

I don't think that's a bad thing. Maybe life is a series of waits for things we may or may not know about. Events happen to us. Other people happen to us. And in between those times we wait. We live. We enjoy. What if we tried to remain conscious that in those in-between times we were waiting? What if we lived our lives in a constant state of expectation? Watching and waiting to see what happens next? What if we lived our lives with the same anticipation and joy that children exhibit for most of the month of December? We may not know exactly what might come jiggling down the chimney, but could we wait for it with a child's sugarplum dancing excitement?

What if we could live our lives as though we really believed that God might love us. You all know that I don't claim to know what that would mean. It could mean that I would live my life as though some of you might love me. Might act in my life. Might intervene, if you will, as God's agent. I mean, if God can use Balaam's ass surely God could use a Wedgewoodian. Whatever it might mean, could I live my life at least on occasion as though I'm waiting for something to happen to me? for me? Could I live my life from time to time as though I'm about to do something very meaningful? Could I live my life expecting to make a difference? Can I spend the next several weeks waiting for God?

As someone pointed out to me on the church's website discussion forum: *"The skeptic might point out that the birth of Jesus may have held out hope for a new, fresh beginning for this world but that hope has not been fulfilled. A non-skeptic might say, 'Ah, but who knows what the future will bring or how much time the change is to take.' Both could see the story as a metaphor or perhaps as an image."* I think that's what Advent is. It's the time every year when we give a bit less than a tithe of our year to re-imagining the incarnation of God. Maybe the fresh start has to happen over and over. Maybe the seasonal myths and celebrations of our ancestors are genetic. Maybe we ignore them to our peril. Maybe we *need* to spend some time waiting. Maybe we *need* to spend time in joy.

I said earlier that waiting and joy seemed a bit mutually exclusive for me. I'm not a patient person. For the few of you who know me, that can't be a surprise. I don't enjoy waiting, as a rule. I don't think I'm unique. Remember the old joke prayer: "God give me patience. And give it to me now!?" Now, faced with Advent and a call to wait and watch, I'm antsy. There are so many problems with *waiting* for four weeks in *joy*. My job isn't waiting. My job is running headlong downhill straight toward the fiscal year end. No waiting there. Not much joy, either. There are Christmas presents to be bought and wrapped. Parties to give and parties to attend. Food to be eaten. Weight to be lost. Decorations to be put about. Friends to see. Family events

to be juggled. Too many obligations, too little time. No time to wait or watch or enjoy. Is there?

There's a Britcom I watch from time to time called Waiting for God. The show's name comes from the fact that it's about a senior citizens housing complex somewhere – the play is on waiting for death really. But maybe that is a perfect example of waiting. The characters on the show don't obsess about death. They live their lives and enjoy it. Some more than others. They love and play. The main characters are cantankerous and full of life. They may know their time is short, but that doesn't appear to bother them much. Could I live like that? Could you? Will waiting on the Lord renew my strength?

In keeping with our corporate concentration on Joy for this Advent, I'm going to try. I'm going to try not to take my life for granted. I'm going to try not to become so entangled in the mundane trivialities of living that I miss life itself. I'm going to try to cherish my moments and my hours. I'm going to try to wait and watch. Like a child waiting for Christmas morning, I'm going to think of what could be and what might be. Not presents in the traditional sense. But what gifts might be out there if I only look for them. I'm going to try to find the face of God in people I see. I'm going to hear the sound of sleigh bells and grin and imagine the wind on my face and the crunch of snow under the hooves of the horses. I'm going to live life... not just work. Not just go through the motions. I'm going to try to enjoy the minutes.

I know I can't maintain it all the time. Especially at work I expect the pressures exterior to my intentions will impede my reveling in the process of waiting. But I'm gonna try! That's how I'm going to attempt to find out what it means to wait in joy. Not by analyzing it. But by trying to do it.

Amen.