

“Worth the Wait”

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Luke 2: 29 & Isaiah 40: 31

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One of the lesser-known stories of Jesus' birth is that of Anna and Simeon. When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to make the sacrifice of thanksgiving required of them for the birth of a first-born son, Anna and Simeon were already there; waiting. They had been resident in the temple for years, waiting a long time for this moment to arrive – a very long time. They had been promised, and were certain, that they would live to see the Messiah, even if it took a lifetime of waiting. They were the two who prophesied over the infant.

When Simeon took little Jesus in his arms, he said *“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”*

And Anna *“Gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Israel.”*

As I thought about this pair, waiting for a lifetime for one brief peek at a little baby, I started thinking about waiting. Most people say that waiting is the hardest thing to do, so it seemed worth reflecting this morning on the importance of being still and waiting.

The first thing that is clear to me is that waiting is totally a lost art in our modern culture. One of the most common expressions that we've all said is “I just can't wait!” We can't wait for a holiday to start, or a new job, a wedding, and for many, retirement. (I am amazed at how many people can name the exact date when they will be able to retire!)

A number of years ago, I was organizing an Ecumenical Good Friday Walk in St. Catharines. (I served there in a downtown Church in the 1980's) Since the planned route of the walk went down a main artery, Church Street, I had to talk with the city traffic engineer. He wanted to know how long we needed each intersection blocked off. He explained to me that motorists today are not accustomed to waiting longer than twenty seconds at a traffic light. Did you know that? I didn't, but apparently the average red light in a Canadian city is no longer than twenty seconds. A thirty-second light is a very long red light. Motorists, it seems, are all in a hurry, and no one can abide waiting very long for a red light to turn green — as every last

one of us in this room knows all too well. In a sense, the twenty-second traffic light is a symbol of our impatient age.

The second thing that is clear to me is that our society desperately needs to relearn the importance of how to be quietly patient and *wait*. Waiting can be the most creative time in our lives. It is not the same as doing nothing. Anna and Simeon had waited a long time, over seventy years in Anna's case, to see the Messiah. It was a lifetime filled with study, prayer, meditation, worship and teaching. That anyone would want to spend a lifetime in prayer and meditation is difficult for modern Westerners to understand. Yet, in ancient times, the quiet meditative tradition was not only common, it was highly valued. The ancients thought it important to have people like Anna and Simeon in their midst. It is still important in eastern cultures and in some Christian traditions today, like the Roman Catholic Church, though even there it is increasingly rare.

A wonderful young man who grew up in our own congregation is now in retreat at a Carthusian monastery in Vermont — Chris Hanes, the son of Jim & Linda. I remember him well as a 12 year-old reading the scriptures from this pulpit! The Carthusians are a contemplative order. He is the only young person I know who is following this path.

There is an old saying that all things come to those who wait. But here in the west the overwhelming emphasis today is on action, on productivity, rather than simply waiting and being. I found this out when I started looking up references on the importance of waiting. I found next to nothing. And those that I did find were negative, equating waiting with loafing around and laziness. Almost all the prevailing wisdom of our culture emphasizes the importance of hard work, of getting things done. "Get'er done and get'er-done quickly!" Words like 'rush', 'just in time,' and 'expedite' are the common coinage of the work place. The biggest shortage, even among those who are retired, even more than money, is *time*. It's hard to find enough time in a day to get everything done.

Well, before we plunge into another frantic year, I would like us to ponder two quotes from interesting and famous people. The first quote comes from General Dwight David Eisenhower, the supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe during World War II, and later President of the United States. Eisenhower once wrote this: "***The urgent is seldom important, and the important is seldom urgent.***" This comes from a man who was bombarded daily by matters presented as urgent. He went on to say that most of the things we get worked up about appear to be urgent when in fact they are not. General Eisenhower's advice was ***slow down and – wait***. Really important things are rarely that pressing. They will wait.

A good test, before we rush around like a chicken without its head on, is to ask ourselves “If I don’t do this right now, what difference will it make in a month’s time, in a year’s time, or in ten years’ time? Usually, the answer is *absolutely none at all*. Most things that drive us and push us are actually quite trivial, and count for very little in the long run. They can wait, just as you and I can learn to wait.

The second quote comes from Carl Jung, the famous psychologist. He wrote this: “Mostly we don’t solve our problems — we outgrow them.” If we slow down and wait a while, it *will* get warmer, the snow & ice *will* melt away, the sky will still be blue, the grass will still be green, and the flowers will still be beautiful. The only difference is we will have time to see them and to enjoy them. For all our striving and all our rushing around, we seldom solve our problems. If anything, half the time we make them worse.

In terms of Christian doctrine, what I am talking about is grace – the grace of God. Grace is love that we have not earned and favour we have not merited. It is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord. This love is a gift that comes to us *while we wait with thankfulness in God’s presence*. You see, basic to the gospel is the understanding that God’s love and care is not dependent upon what we do, or even what we do not do. Rather, he cares about us because of who we are – his children.

In so many places in the Bible we are told to wait – to wait for the Lord our God. It’s a special time when we can just be ourselves. It is a time when we can take stock and think about where we are going, and why, and what really is important for us. This is why coming to Church on a Sunday morning is so important — it’s a totally different kind of activity. For most of us, it is the only time in the week when we sit quietly and reflect and think and pray. What you’re doing is waiting for God’s inner voice to speak, and for God’s love to touch you.

Let me conclude by telling you of a curious story that came out of Russia. A number of years ago, zoologists discovered a species of wild geese in the Steppe region of Western Siberia that were behaving in a very strange way. The birds’ regular summer nesting grounds is on the Siberian Steppe (Prairies). Each fall they travel south to winter by the Ganges River in India – a journey of almost three thousand miles. The strange thing that baffled scientists is that the geese were seen taking the first 100 miles of their long journey – on foot. Each August the birds were becoming increasingly restless, and then one day all of a sudden, they would start heading south, one hundred thousand strong, slowly and painfully marching across the steppe like columns of weary soldiers in an army several miles wide. They managed to travel barely nine to ten miles a day.

Soon they grew weaker. Predators moved in – wolves, foxes, coyotes. After about ten days the remnants of this strange army arrived at a lake one hundred miles south of their nesting grounds. There in the cool water of their natural habitat, the exhausted geese quickly recovered. A few days later they continued their journey south but now, instead of walking, they flew!

The scientist, naturally, were very puzzled by this bizarre behaviour. They studied the geese with some care and discovered that they had fallen victim to climate change and their own internal clocks. A biological clock within, which measures the length of days and degrees of the sun, tells the birds when they must leave for the south. But something has gone wrong in this part of Siberia. The scientists are divided over whether it is the effect of industrial pollution from nearby cities, or the effect of climate change, or both. Whatever it is, the problem for the geese is that they have not completed their yearly moulting before the urge to move south becomes urgent. They have not yet acquired their full growth of feathers and so, although they feel they must move, they are unable to fly. So they set off, on foot, on a journey of three thousand miles. Ten days later when they reach the lake, their feathers have grown back sufficiently that they are able to fly once again.

What I am suggesting is that too many of us are like those geese. We want to fly before our wings are ready. There is a fullness of time for you and me – for everyone — that allows us to fly instead of stumbling along the ground.

The prophet Isaiah said, “Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” We tend to miss that little word “wait”. Those who wait.

In the Psalms we read, “Be still, and know that I am God! (Don’t rush around!) I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.”

There is spiritual nourishment that comes in no other way than simply waiting on the Lord. It’s a wait that will allow the love and the grace of God to touch you as surely as it touched the lives Simeon and Anna so long ago. Some things are worth waiting for.
Amen.