

November 30, 2003
First Sunday of Advent
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Faith and Waiting

Psalm 25:1-10 ...*you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.*

*Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?*

(Tao te Ching, 6th century B.C.E.)

Waiting is an integral part of living. Every day we have to wait for something or someone. We wait in line at the Post Office, at the grocery store, at the traffic light. Some waiting is simply frustrating, holding us back when we want to hurry on our way. Other kinds of waiting are filled with anxiousness, as when we wait for a loved one or friend who is having surgery. We wait for bones to heal, family to arrive for a visit, payday to get here, and many other things.

It is hard to wait. However, waiting gives us a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth and awareness. We wait because we need something or someone. I wait in line at the grocery store because I need food. I sit in the doctor's "waiting room" because I need my doctor's help when I am sick. Waiting reveals to us that we are not alone and isolated. We live in an interdependent world, relying upon other people for many things. We are interrelated with all of life. So we must wait. And as we wait, we can reflect upon this marvelous web of life in which we live.

Advent is about turning toward God, the source and foundation of life. It is about waiting for God, opening our lives to the movements of God's spirit. Psalm 25 says: "For you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long." Advent is also about discerning the "many paths of God" which are steadfast love and faithfulness (v. 10), and which are ours to walk. This kind of waiting is kin to what Jesus talked about as alertness or being awake. In the gospel reading, Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down" and "be alert at all times." Waiting is not "doing nothing." It is waking up, becoming alert. It is not withdrawing from life, from reality, from the world. It is becoming fully aware of what is going on around us and in us, including God and the movements of God's spirit. Then we will be ready to respond in ways that are harmonious with God's will and desire for the world and us.

Advent is a time to be in touch with what is disconnected in us. These holiday seasons are very difficult for people who suffer from depression or anxiety, from losses, from struggles with addictions or bouts of despondency. Everything around us is gearing up for lights and tinsel, for spending sprees that we can't afford, for all sorts of superficial "Christmas spirit." This is not all bad. I enjoy the sentiments of Christmas as much as anyone. And yet, Advent keeps us from falling into superficiality and sentimentalism. In Advent we hear a deeper invitation to wait, to watch, to be alert. The words of waiting and hope are meant precisely for those who are suffering, who feel themselves in prisons of despair or helplessness, dungeons of depression or deprivation. It is precisely to such real experiences of brokenness and disconnection that God comes bringing new life.

Waiting is a leaning of the soul toward God. It is a basic spiritual attitude, the patient expectation that God is present and active in the life of the world and in our own lives. Our waiting is grounded in the wisdom that we live best when we are attuned and connected to God and what God is doing.

So waiting is not a spiritual problem. It is an important dimension of the life of faith. We wait because of our need for God, the source of wholeness, of true life. "You are the God of my salvation," says the psalmist. Salvation means healing and wholeness. Waiting on God means turning toward and opening up to that source of wholeness. When we rush ahead of God, when we are constantly pushing and anxiously pressing our agenda for other people, the world, and ourselves, we become part of the

world's mess, only making it worse. The psalmist says "for you I wait all day long." I don't think the psalmist meant only for one day, only when we're having a bad day. This is an on-going spiritual attitude, a daily openness to God's healing and leading.

When we wait on God, we are led to what is most true, most real, and most important for the world and ourselves. I remember reading somewhere that it took the Quakers many, many decades to come to a consensus in their opposition to slavery. However, they came to it many, many decades before anyone else. This is because the Quaker movement understood the importance of waiting, listening, being led by God's spirit, being passive so that God could bring wholeness to the world through those who "wait on God all day long."

Let me share three reasons why it is important for us to learn to wait for God, to cultivate this spiritual practice of waiting and awareness.

First, **waiting for God is for our own healing, our inner wholeness.** Often we are fragmented, scattered, compartmentalized. We try to respond to so many needs and requests, try to please so many people, that we hardly know ourselves. We do not live out of a sense of our own unique identity, both our wondrous potential and our very real limits. Waiting on God through consistent prayer, meditation, and inner listening enables us to hear that Voice that tells us who we really are, speaks us into being as unique persons, and shows us how wonderfully we are interwoven with all of life. This Voice tells us we are God's beloved, just as we are, precious and unique. If we are practicing daily times of quietness and solitude, prayer and reflection, we will, over time, recover or receive for the first time this integrity of our own lives in God. By simply holding our fragmentation, our scatteredness beneath God's gracious love, we experience, bit by bit, our own healing, our being made whole.

Second, **when we are hurt--physically, emotionally, or spiritually--we need time for healing to come.** We cannot rush the process. Don Morrison broke his ankle some weeks ago. He has to spend six weeks in a cast. He has to hobble around and take his time. He can't go prancing up ladders working on his house. He has to wait for healing to come. Meanwhile, Don chose to make the most of this time of waiting. He is reading and thinking and reflecting. He is working on collecting and organizing the letters and articles he has written over the years about sustainable living, about stewardship.

This kind of waiting is forced upon us by circumstances beyond our control. This time last year, a man in our congregation in Indiana suddenly lost his job. One morning he went to work, was called into someone's office and told his services were no longer needed. His world was rocked, not only his financial situation but also his sense of self worth and his faith. He and I met every week, sometimes more often when his anxiety soared. Deep spiritual and emotional issues had been stirred up by his job loss. For him, waiting meant that he could do nothing to change what had happened. In that sense, he was powerless. And yet it was not a passive waiting. He was sorting through ideas about himself and God that had been shaken. He struggled with self-pity, and found a new empathy with people facing situations far more devastating than his. Through those months of waiting, he plumbed the depths of life. He was doing hard spiritual work that would serve him well. Life would never be the same even once he gained another job. Life would be far richer, deeper. He had needed time to wait, to heal, and his healing was more profound than he could have expected.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes that when an animal in the forest is hurt, it goes immediately and lies down. It does nothing. It doesn't eat. It doesn't go looking for a cure. It goes somewhere and simply lies down and waits for healing [*The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, p. 27]. When we are hurting, when we are suffering in some way, we want to find an immediate cure. We rush here and there, asking everyone's advice and sympathy. Or we lash out at others, blaming someone or something for our pain. But none of that works. We need to be like the animal in the forest that simply lies down and waits for healing. We need to give ourselves time and space and the quietness to heal. We want to run away from the hurt, the source of our suffering, for it is too painful. But we can't run from it. It is better to embrace it like a hurt child, to accept what we are experiencing, and learn how to trustfully wait for healing to come.

This indicates how we can truly be of help to others when they are hurt or hurting. The most helpful thing we can do is simply be there, present with and for others, not pressing them for information, to talk, or anything else. Neither should we try to "fix" others' problems. When we do so, we are taking their lives from them, robbing them of the experience of finding out for themselves what they need and

pursuing it. What we need from others when our lives feel in chaos or collapse is their solidity, their presence, their simple steadfastness. This allows us to find the healing that will come to us in its own way and time.

A third reason for learning to wait on God is **our need to find the path in our lives that fills us with purpose and meaning**. Seeking advice, reading books, talking with others—these things are fine and helpful. But ultimately we need to do the one thing that can truly provide the direction we seek—become quiet, listen inwardly, and wait until the direction arises within us, authentically and truly of God. We don't always have to have something to show others. We don't have to always know where we are going or what we are going to do with our lives. We need to throw off the burden of having to appear successful or in control or any of the other modern-day delusions. If we are to be people led by God's spirit, so that our living is grounded in God and our true selves, then we need to be unafraid and unapologetic about taking the time we need to touch base with God's call in our lives.

What is God's call in my life? To what particular need or aspect of the world is God calling me? To find answers to these questions we need to know ourselves connected to God and God's movements of new life in the world. We need to be in harmony with our own uniqueness and God's saving, wholeness-bringing purposes in the world. Where our own unique life and gifts connect with the need of the world for healing, beauty, justice, peace, and compassion--that is where God calls us. Discerning this call takes the kind of waiting the psalmist is talking about. Not just one time in our lives, but "all day long," every day, the whole journey of our lives.

As we go through these days of Advent, perhaps these words from the psalmist can be for us a centering prayer:

"You are the God of my salvation, my wholeness.

For you I wait all day long."

Let us pray: Instill in us, O God, the patience of waiting. May our waiting be tinged with
 hope and expectation, leaning toward you and your salvation.
 For as surely as you came to a waiting and longing world in Jesus,
 you come to us each moment and day, bringing new life and light. Amen.