

Waiting and Keeping Awake

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.)*

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. Waiting is frustrating when we want to hurry on to the next thing. Waiting is painful when some crisis has arisen in the life of one we love or in our own life, and we are filled with anxiousness and fear.

We can see waiting in one of two ways. We can treat waiting as an intruder on life, something to be dreaded, even eliminated. The commercial world makes a lot of money offering "no wait" devices! Or we can look more deeply and see that waiting is integral to life, and is an important spiritual teacher. I wait because I 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. Waiting reminds us that we live in an interdependent world, relying upon other people and the earth itself for all that sustain us. We are interrelated with all of life. So we must wait. And as we wait, we can grow in gratitude for this interrelated, interdependent web of life of which we are a part.

Advent is about waiting for God, opening our lives to God as the source of our healing, our direction, our awareness of what is good and true and right. 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's steadfast love and faithfulness" (v. 10), and which path is given to us with our particular calling and gifts. When we are waiting in this way, I think we experience 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." Waiting saves us from our tendency to race around, running away from things, and trying to cover up our inner confusion with busy-ness. Waiting offers us the opportunity to wake up, become aware of what is going on around us and in us, including the movements and leadings 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.

Thanksgiving morning I had to make a visit to the emergency room of the Bourbon County KY Community Hospital. After three weeks of wrestling with what began as a cold, I found out that I had a fledgling case of bronchitis. The doctor prescribed an antibiotic, which is doing its job. He also prescribed prednisone to deal with the inflammation. The side effect of prednisone is a kind of jittery hyperactivity. So yesterday, I was trying to get serious about a sermon on the importance of waiting when my body and mind wanted to do anything but sit and wait! This rather humorous quandary yielded an important insight, however. The kind of waiting that the psalm is talking about, the kind of waiting that is at the heart of the spiritual life, is not about sitting around and doing nothing. Sometimes we DO need to do that. But when the psalmist talks about waiting all day long for God, this is not about inactivity. It is about an attitude of the soul, of the spirit. It is about keeping our hearts and minds open toward God because it is from God that salvation comes. And salvation in scripture always means healing or wholeness, as well as finding our way through difficult situations. Waiting is about living as those who are guided and led by the Power that is at the heart of life itself--God. "Make me to know your ways, O God," says the psalmist. "Teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me." The psalmist knows that action which does not arise from the truth that is at the heart of life does no good and helps no one. Activism is not the solution to the world's problems, but action that arises from wisdom, insight, patience, and depth of understanding. Waiting on God means turning toward and opening up to that source of wholeness. When we rush ahead of God, when we are anxiously pressing our agenda for other people, the world, and ourselves, we become part of the world's mess, only making things worse. This is why the inward journey is crucial. The life of faith is not about accomplishing things. When the outward journey--the

work we feel called to do--becomes detached from or is not undergirded and led by the inward journey of inner listening and receptivity, the results will not be good. This waiting dimension of our lives is about being channels of what God wants to do through us, in the way God wants to do them for the good of life. When 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, or only once in a while. This is an on-going spiritual attitude and practice, 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 decades to come to a consensus in opposition to slavery. However, they came to it 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 the actions of those who are able to "wait on God all day long."

Let me share briefly 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 wholeness.** Often we are fragmented, scattered, compartmentalized. We respond to too many needs and requests, try to please too many people, so that we are out of touch with who we are and what we have been given to offer the world. We are not living out of a sense of our own gifts and callings, and we do not recognize and honor 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 and what is and is not ours to offer, what we are called to do and what we are not called to do. And, perhaps most importantly, 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. We will begin to experience more wholeness in our lives.

Second, **when we are hurt--physically, emotionally, or spiritually--we wait for healing to come.** We cannot rush the process. I remember about six years ago when Don Morrison broke his ankle while building his house out in Concord. He had to spend weeks in a cast, hobbling around and taking his time. He couldn't go prancing up ladders working on his house! He had to wait for healing to come. Meanwhile, Don chose to make the most of this time of waiting. He was reading and thinking and reflecting. He was working on collecting and organizing all he had written over the years about sustainable living and stewardship.

This kind of waiting is forced upon us by circumstances beyond our control. I remember a man in our congregation in Indiana who 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. We 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 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.

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 situation. But none of that really works. We need to give ourselves time and space and the quietness to heal. We need to seek insight into our own experience and our own hearts and minds, what we are to learn from our suffering and hurt. Rather than run from our hurt, we embrace it and learn how to trustfully wait for healing to come.

This indicates how we can truly be of help to others when they are 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 paths we are given to walk, the journeys we are called to take.** This is about "all the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness." There

is not one path. There are many. How do we find OUR path in God's steadfast love and faithfulness? 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 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."