

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
December 13, 2015

OPENING WORDS ~ *Gretta Vosper*

We come here because we are tired of waiting.
Tired of waiting for the world to change, for hope to be redundant
and the world to be a place where peace is known and lived completely.
Tired of waiting too, too long to come to know others well enough
that we cannot exploit them, harm them, make war against them,
to know them well enough that we can only love them.
We dream of a world of peace
in which families raise up children who live justly,
in which societies raise up values
that honour creation and human dignity
in which love is raised up by all and no one need be alone.
This morning, we gather together,
for we are tired of waiting alone.

Here we are. Let us wait. Together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Christmas Farm* ~ *Mary Lyn Ray*
(A woman and a young boy plant 62 dozen trees and wait through many seasons for them to be big enough for Christmas trees.)

READING *Drawing Near; A Blessing to Begin Advent* ~ *Jan R. Richardson*
A writer since childhood, Jan Richardson discovered her artistic gifts when she began making collages from construction paper during her seminary years. After serving at a United Methodist Church in Orlando, Richardson developed a full-time ministry in the arts. Her husband died unexpectedly at the beginning of Advent in 2013 of a brain aneurysm. She writes, "In the time that has unfolded since then, never have I had such a keen sense of the ways that light and dark dwell together, and how grace imbues the places that are most laden with shadows and unfathomable mystery."

It is difficult to see it from here, I know, but trust me when I say this blessing is inscribed on the horizon. Is written on that far point you can hardly see. Is etched into	a landscape whose contours you cannot know from here. All you know is that it calls you, draws you, pulls you toward what you have perceived only in pieces,
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in fragments that came to you
in dreaming
or in prayer.
I cannot account for how,
as you draw near,
the blessing embedded in the
horizon
begins to blossom
upon the soles of your feet,
shimmers in your two hands.
It is one of the mysteries
of the road,
how the blessing
that you were born.

you have traveled toward,
waited for,
ached for
suddenly appears
as if it had been with you
all this time,
as if it simply
needed to know
how far you were willing
to walk
to find the lines
that were traced upon you
before the day

MESSAGE

There's a famous play by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. Do you know it? I've never been involved in a production of it, and I can't remember even having seen it. But I read it...years ago...and in my theatre studies it was heralded as a great work. It is a simple story, if you can call it that, of two bedraggled men...Vladimir and Estragon...sitting and waiting, waiting over two acts and two days, waiting for someone named Godot. That's about all that happens, other than that each day, a man and his slave pass by. Oh, and there's also a boy who comes to tell them that Godot isn't coming...until maybe tomorrow. So the two men pass the time; they chat and argue languidly, they despair, they philosophize, and they wait.

Many have tried to interpret the meaning of this play. Beckett himself apparently tired of those who wanted to find some meaning, saying that he didn't understand why people needed to complicate something so simple.¹

It seems to me that there is nothing simple about waiting. Consider even the few moments of waiting for a bus to come, for a doctor's appointment, for a friend to arrive. In those moments, one can swing from acceptance to annoyance, from worry to anger, from feelings of abandonment to anxious pacing. Even those who are able to use waiting time productively must surely have worked to develop skills...skills of non-attachment, of letting go, perhaps even of meditation.

Waiting is not so simple.

In moments of waiting, our minds are free to wander, often into shadowy areas of blame, anger, and worry. Have I been forgotten? Has something dreadful happened? Will the delay

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_for_Godot

cause further problems? Why is this person always late? Am I not worthy of a little consideration? And then on to berating ourselves for not being more patient.

Waiting is not so simple.

There is the fruitless, paralyzing kind of waiting for something that is not to be, cannot be. This is the Miss Havisham² kind of waiting, waiting for unrequited love to be returned, waiting for something that has already happened to be erased from history, waiting for someone to rise from the grave, waiting for buds to sprout on a dead tree. We wait to be the person we are not. We wait for others to be the someones they are not.

Waiting is not so simple.

And then there's another kind of waiting...waiting on something out of our control...some news, decision, or event that we believe will then make it possible for us to do the next thing...to move, or act, or, at the very least, know that we must wait longer. We wait for job offers, for paycheques to be deposited, for an election to determine who will be in power. We wait to be old enough, or for the trees to grow big enough to cut.³ We wait for the weather to change, for a baby to be born, for the muse to visit us, for Christmas (or just some snow) to come. We wait for results of medical tests, we wait for our honey to come home, we wait for the other shoe to drop.

Waiting is indeed prevalent, but it is not so simple.

Advent begs for the spiritual practice of waiting. A practice because waiting is not our best suit; a spiritual practice because the promise of this season is that there is a gift to be found in the waiting. The waiting of advent is an exercise in relaxing into something that is sure, if still just out of our grasp or sight. Advent is not just any old kind of waiting; at its best, it is a waiting that is imbued with trust...trust even when we find ourselves in darkness, or in the dark night of the soul.

Quaker educator and philosopher Parker Palmer suggests that as human beings we live in a tragic gap...the gap between what is and what could be. Doesn't that describe waiting beautifully? Waiting is to exist in the gap between what is and what we expect, or want, to happen next. But Palmer advises that we avoid jumping onto either side...saying that focusing on what is, particularly if we think that change is not going to happen, can lead to 'corrosive cynicism.' He also suggests that focusing on what could be leads to 'irrelevant idealism,' at least if we live so much in the dream, or the future, that we are not present to what is.⁴ One side of the waiting is corrosive, the other irrelevant.

² A character in Dickens' "Great Expectations" who was left at the altar and remains in her wedding dress, sitting at the wedding feast, for the rest of her life.

³ A reference to the story, "Christmas Farm" by Mary Lyn Ray used earlier in the service

⁴ <http://www.couragerenewal.org/the-tragic-gap/>

You see, Palmer believes that the gap is where all the action is! In an interview with Sun Magazine⁵, he said he calls it "'tragic' because it's a gap that will never close, an inevitable flaw in the human condition. No one," he says, "who has stood for high values – love, truth, justice – has died being able to declare victory, once and for all. If we embrace values like those, we need to find ways to stand in the gap for the long haul, and be prepared to die without having achieved our goals."

We will always be in waiting for the dream...for love, for truth, for justice...even as we glimpse signs of its coming, coming closer, all around us. It serves us well to remember that the gap, between what is and what could be, is where all the action, the juice, is.

In her poem "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does it End?" Mary Oliver seems to standing in that gap. Here's an excerpt:

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.
Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.
And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree –
they are all in this too.
And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
comes.
At least, closer.
And, cordially.

Everything in the world comes, at least closer. This is advent-style waiting...standing around with your arms open and knowing that something will come.

This advent-style waiting is not without intention. It is waiting while also watching... looking... and choosing to have one's arms, one's heart, open. It is actively trusting that everything in the world comes, at least closer.

And cordially. Last Sunday, Rumi was with us, at least in spirit, telling us that being human is a guest house, and that we should treat each guest honourably. Here, Oliver seems to be saying that each guest comes to us cordially...with good intentions. Can we trust that?

Oh, my god! Haven't you been proud of this country this week? As outrageous rhetoric in the US calls for allowing no Muslims into that country, our Prime Minister is at the airport welcoming the first plane of refugees... telling them that they are "home," reminding us all that in this country our hearts are big enough to love Syria and Canada. These people are

⁵ http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/443/if_only_we_would_listen

coming to this country so cordially, with so much gratitude, it should be impossible not to see their arrival as a gift.

Everything comes. At least closer. And cordially.

Waiting need not be a state of inactivity. While our Refugee Sponsorship Committee waits for the day that the people we will sponsor arrive in Peterborough, there is much work to be done, many preparations. And in a way, this is what humans do. We prepare for what is to come, even as we benefit from what has been prepared for us. "We build on foundations we did not lay, we warm ourselves by fires we did not light, we sit in the shade of trees we did not plant, we drink from wells we did not dig," wrote Peter Raible.

While sitting in darkness, advent is being able to recognize all that is given to us, even when we are cold and thirsty. Waiting for that for which we so long, and, in that stillness, finding and practicing gratitude for what we have. Waiting, that we might soon, eventually respond with some action of preparation.

So, let us not ever forget, or begrudge, the quiet place of waiting...that gap...that time of limbo...that practice of letting go and trusting. Palmer says that what it takes to stand in the tragic gap, that juicy place between what is and what could be, is not action, or effectiveness, but rather, what it takes for us to abide in this gap is faithfulness.

Faithfulness. To what? He said that faithfulness is "being true to my own gifts, true to my perception of the world's needs, and true to those points where my gifts and those needs intersect. If I can say of my life, 'To the best of my ability, I was faithful' in this sense, then I think I'll be able to die feeling that my time on earth was well spent, even though my big goals will remain unaccomplished."

Waiting, existing in the gap requires a faithfulness that is being true to our own gifts. It's a funny conundrum, isn't it? This place of waiting for something that surely will come but is out of our control; stuck, as it were, trying to be faithful, knowing, yet not fully realizing, our gifts. Come to think of it, we don't often fully trust our own gifts to carry us through. Yet, the god, the light for which we wait is the same god, or light, within...a god, a light, which is always present, yet always waited upon.

Can you stand it if I try to weave in one more befuddling strand? One of my favourite writings of all time is the message from the Hopi Elders which was given at the turn of the new millennium:

"There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are torn apart and will suffer greatly.

"Know the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above water. And I

say, see who is in there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, Least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

"The time for the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves! Banish the word struggle from your attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

"We are the ones we've been waiting for."

The season of Advent, of waiting, is not meant to last all year. The moment comes when what we have been waiting for comes, and then...well, then there will be something required of us in response. The Hopi Elders seem to be saying that the time for waiting is over, because what we need is already in hand.

In his words about being faithful to our true selves, I believe Parker Palmer reminds us that we, individually, are the one we have been waiting for. And in this teaching from the Hopi elders, we are reminded that we, collectively, are to be trusted as the ones we have been waiting for. And I believe both of these things, passionately.

Yet advent, this sacred time of waiting, is something more, and is not to be disregarded as unproductive. In this waiting we claim our faithfulness. In this waiting we learn to trust that we, as a community of all that is, hold all that we need to let go of the shore and push off into the middle of the river, the unknown. And this waiting is also the simple act of being willing to sit in a holy and juicy place.

Waiting. Practicing receptivity. Looking. Opening our arms. Waiting patiently. Waiting for the dreams of some new plan to hatch. For the spark of a future fire to ignite. For the seed of a tree yet to be to germinate. For the waters of some new well to rise. Waiting for that which comes closer to us as we wait.

Simply waiting. Opening ourselves to all that comes to us, cordially, in the dark.

So be it.

READING *We Are Waiting* ~ Leslie Takahashi Morris

This is the season of anticipation,
Of expecting, of hoping, of wanting.

This is the time of expecting the arrival of something--or someone.

We are waiting.

This is the time of living in darkness, in the hues of unknowing.
Of being quiet, of reflecting on a year almost past.

Waiting for a new beginning, for a closing or an end.

This is the time for digesting the lessons of days gone past, anticipating the future for which

We are waiting.

Waiting for a world which can know justice
 Waiting for a lasting peace.
 Waiting for the bridge to span the divides which separate us.
 Waiting for a promise or a hope.
 For all of this

We are waiting.

CLOSING WORDS

Blessing for Waiting ~ Jan R. Richardson

Who wait
 for the night
 to end
 bless them.
 Who wait
 for the night
 to begin
 bless them.
 Who wait
 in the hospital room
 who wait
 in the cell
 who wait
 in prayer
 bless them.
 Who wait
 for news
 who wait
 for the phone call
 who wait
 for a word
 who wait
 for a job
 a house
 a child
 bless them.

Who wait
 for one who
 will come home
 who wait
 for one who
 will not come home
 bless them.
 Who wait with fear
 who wait with joy
 who wait with
 peace
 who wait with rage
 who wait for the
 end
 who wait for the
 beginning
 who wait alone
 who wait together
 bless them.
 Who wait
 without knowing
 what they wait for
 or why
 bless them.
 Who wait
 when they

should not wait
 who wait
 when they should
 be
 in motion
 who wait
 when they need
 to rise
 who wait
 when they need
 to set out
 bless them.
 Who wait
 for the end
 of waiting
 who wait
 for the fullness
 of time
 who wait
 emptied and
 open and
 ready
 who wait
 for you
 o bless.

Oh. Bless you. Bless you. Go in peace and love. Amen.