

Epiphany 3B, 1/24/2021

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, ABQ

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Readings at https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Epiphany/BEpi3_RCL.html

There is, both in our scriptures and in our own lives and world,
an ever-present tension

A tension between urgency and patience;

a tension between the need to wait and the need to act

I feel that tension acutely.

There are so many situations that just *will not, cannot change* overnight---situations where patience and waiting are an integral part of our necessary, faithful response. *We all* know what it is to wait.

In recent months, as a global community, we have had to wait:

.... first for the development of a COVID-19 Vaccine...now for the widespread distribution and administration of that vaccine.

In recent months, as a nation, we have had to wait:

.... first for an election...then for an inauguration...now for what's next...

As students, we have had to wait:

...for grades...for admission letters...for graduation

As families, we have had to wait:

...for the conception of a child, for the birth of a child, for the growth of a child

As individuals, we have had to wait:

...for a diagnosis...for a treatment...for a report on the results of that treatment...

Waiting is hard.

Lately it has seemed to me that the hardest part of waiting is not just being patient.

The hardest part of waiting is being simultaneously patient AND alert, patient AND hopeful, patient AND ready for action.

Because, for me at least, I notice that the energy of “waiting” can, over time, give way to a sort of foggy, drowsy, sluggishness; the energy of “waiting” can, over time, be subtly replaced by inertia born of apathy, or despair, or plain old fatigue.

This is the challenge. I believe that the “waiting” to which God calls us---and I’m afraid God *does* call us to wait---this holy waiting requires **patience without passivity**.

Yes, we must wait for a vaccine...AND while we’re waiting, we must wear our masks, and wash our hands, and keep our distance, and find concrete ways to support healthcare workers, and teachers, and frontline workers, and those suffering from unemployment and economic hardship.

Yes, we had to wait for the inauguration...AND while we were waiting, we could still register voters, and contact legislators, and amplify black voices, and reduce our carbon consumption, and work for justice.

Yes, we must wait for graduation AND in the meantime, we must study and strive and learn and grow.

Yes, we must wait for the birth...AND while we’re waiting, we can take vitamins and classes, and rest, and exercise, and hold and be held, and seek support.

Yes, we must wait for the test results...AND as we wait, we walk in the sunshine, and call an old friend, and do some of that writing we’ve been meaning to do, and take time to breathe, and meditate, and pray.

Holy waiting requires patience without passivity. **Patience without passivity**. That is the key.

Because, even in and amidst our waiting, God is always on the verge of doing a new thing, and if we want to be part of it, we need to be awake and be ready--- poised to say “yes” and move forward at a moment’s notice.

I’d been pondering this paradox all week when it came time for dinner on Friday evening. Our family has created a “COVID-19 Bubble” with one other family---my best friend from Berkeley, Sabine, and her son, who moved in across the street from us in August. Sabine and her son, Alex, are Jewish, so every Friday night we join them for Shabbat--for prayers, and dinner, and a little bit of Torah study. This past Friday we were reading together the story of Israel’s Exodus from slavery in Egypt. The people of Israel have been slaves in Egypt for more than 400 years. And we’d been reading about Moses pleading with Pharaoh for his people’s release, and plague after plague and hopes raised and hopes dashed for what probably felt to some like hundreds of years. Then, suddenly,

Pharaoh says “go”, and after 400 years of waiting the people of Israel must get up and go *immediately*---they can’t even wait for their bread to rise!!!! I can imagine an exasperated Israelite mama thinking, “we’ve waited 400 years already....and now we can’t spare 3 hours more for my bread to rise?” Well no. It turns out sometimes we can’t. When the moment comes, we must be ready to seize it. When the door opens, we must be ready to step through. When God acts, we’d better be ready to respond! Even when we’ve been waiting for 400 years.

Perhaps you’ve experienced something somewhat akin to this in recent weeks with the COVID-19 vaccine. You’ve been sitting cooped up at home for the past 10 months--half-heartedly reading the headlines to pass the time and waiting and wondering if “good news” might not actually be an oxymoron-- when all of a sudden one morning you get the text message from the NM DOH and you’ve gotta jump and respond to that message IMMEDIATELY because if you don’t move quickly, all the open vaccination appointments will already be filled!

Waiting, but watching, ready to act. Patience without passivity. That is the challenge we face.

For those of you who like to keep track of such things, we are in “Year B” in our lectionary cycle, the second in our 3-year cycle of Sunday Readings, which means that this year we will be hearing a lot from the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s is the shortest of the four gospels, and reading it always leaves me a little breathless. Mark rushes from one scene to the next in the life of Jesus at breakneck speed... “immediately” this, and “immediately” that. If you have found yourself getting a little too comfy on your corona-tide couch, Mark’s Gospel is sure to wake you up.

All the “immediacy” of Mark’s Gospel makes me a little anxious, and leads me back to my original question:

How do we balance God’s call to wait with God’s call to act?

How do we stay Awake?

How do we stay alert and engaged and ready to act, able to move and willing to change direction on a moment’s notice, without running around frantically in a thousand directions like a bunch of chickens with our heads cut off?

How do we wait with patience, without falling into complacency, apathy, or lethargy? How do we wait without falling asleep?

I don’t have any easy answer. Honestly, I don’t believe there is one. But I *can* tell you where I find clues in today’s readings that I believe might point us in the *direction* of a more faithful response.

1. In our 1st reading, from Jonah, I find this clue:

*Jonah cries out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh **believe** God; they proclaim a fast, and everyone, great and small, puts on sackcloth.*

The story tells us that the people of Ninevah learn that disaster is coming, and they believe God, proclaim a fast, and repent of their wickedness.... The story doesn't tell us that the Ninevites do these things in the hopes of averting disaster or evading God's judgement. Jonah didn't say "Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown, UNLESS...." We are left to suppose that the people of Ninevah believe God, proclaim a fast, and repent of their wickedness, NOT because they believe they can escape God's judgement, but because, through Jonah's words, they have come to see clearly where they are headed, and they have also come to clearly see their power to choose to do right with what little time they had left. (Now, it is the case that in this story, in choosing a new present for themselves, the Ninevites enable God to choose a new future for them as well. Nevertheless, it appears that this alternative future is the felicitous effect, *not the motivation* for the Ninevites' change of heart and action.) I find this a helpful insight. Especially when it comes to apparently unstoppable destructive forces, like climate change. It's never too late to believe and repent. Even if destruction seems inevitable. So, in discerning where God is calling us to wait, and where God is calling us to act, we might remember; The **possibility of disaster or failure is no excuse for inaction**. It's never too late to choose faithfulness.

2. In our 2nd Reading from, 1 Corinthians, I find this clue:

Paul urges the faithful people in Corinth to live as if the end were near. *He writes, "I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short...For the present form of this world is passing away."*

There's nothing like knowing "the end is near" to help us clarify our values and priorities. When I think in terms of a whole lifetime, my life is a jumble of competing demands, and good intentions and goals that I assume I will get around to "eventually". But if, as an imaginative exercise, I imagine that I have only a day, or a week, or a year left to live, my priorities--and God's call to me -- come into much clearer focus. For one thing, it makes the challenge of faithful action seem a little less daunting. I mean it's hard to find the courage and strength to commit to loving my enemies every day for a LIFETIME, but I might be able to commit to loving my enemies for TODAY. So, in discerning where God is calling us to wait, and where God is calling us to act, we might ask: "**What would we choose if time was short?**"

3. Finally, in today's Gospel, I find this clue:

*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew... And Jesus said to them, "Follow me ..." And **immediately** they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat*

*mending the nets. **Immediately** he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him."*

Simon & Andrew leave their nets to follow Jesus. They say "no" to fishing when they say "yes" to following Jesus. They can't do both at once. James and John leave their father, Zebedee, to follow Jesus. They say "no" to remaining with their father when they say "yes" to remaining with Jesus. They can't do both at once.

This is the real clincher for me. Because as soon as I sense the DIRECTION of God's call to action---to Anti-Racism, or Youth Ministry, or Pastoral Care or whatever else-- I want to say "yes" to ALL the things ALL at once. But our human finitude AND our call to faithfulness demand that, instead of saying "yes" to every possible action and invitation that comes our way, we must learn to inhabit a more grounded, watchful, listening, readiness--- a willingness to work and wait patiently right where we are---to allow some invitations to pass by us unheeded, so that when Jesus passes by and calls out OUR name we are free and ready to jump up and say "yes" without missing a beat. So, in discerning where God is calling us to wait, and where God is calling us to act, we might do well to remember: **No one can do everything at once. We will have to say "no" to some things if we want to say "yes" to God's call.**

And so, dear friends, as you dwell with me

in this ever-present tension between urgency and patience

Between God's call to wait and God's call to act

Perhaps you, too, will find direction in our readings this morning.

As we strive to faithfully follow the path God has set before us,

May the saints be our companions, **patience without passivity** be our compass, and Scripture our guideposts along the Way. And as we go, let us keep in mind:

1. **First: No one can do everything at once. We will have to say "no" to some things if we want to say "yes" when God calls.**

2. **Next: When we face conflicting demands and muddled priorities, ask "What would we choose if time was short?"**

3. And finally: The possibility of disaster or failure is no excuse for inaction. It's never too late to choose faithfulness.

In the words of Jesus of Galilee: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Amen.