

Wrestling with “Wait for the Lord”

“Those who wait for the Lord will mount up with wings like eagles.” Isaiah 40:31

Isaiah 40:21-31
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The act of having to wait often causes a great deal of anxiety, especially if it includes an element of deep uncertainty and fear. Case in point. Back in 1939, England, along with all of Europe, was awaiting the inevitable outbreak of what became World War II. To help raise the morale of the British public, who were threatened with widely predicted mass air attacks on major cities, the British government produced three motivational posters. Each had a symbol of the royal crown at the top. One stated, “Freedom is in Peril, Defend it With All Your Might.” Another, “Your Courage, your Cheerfulness, your Resolution, Will Bring Us Victory.” I like the idea of victory through cheerfulness.

A third poster, attributed to only being rediscovered in 2000, has become quite popular of late. It simply states, “**Keep Calm and Carry On.**” (Now that I think about it, that was basically our government’s initial message after 9/11.) Perhaps you have seen this slogan on any number of promotional products or in various media. And as the popularity of “Keep Calm and Carry On” has grown, it has predictably become the object of parody. Here are a few I found on the Internet this week. “Keep Spending and Carry on Shopping” “Don’t Keep Calm, Get Angry” “Now Panic and Freak Out” (the crown has been turned upside down). And Haley Brobston mentioned to me before the service that she has a screensaver that states, “Keep Calm and Eat Cupcakes.” But one of my favorites, “Stay Alive and Avoid Zombies.”

Another version, perhaps more applicable for a service of worship, is printed on the cover of today’s bulletin. In the same format of the original 1939 poster, it states, “**Keep Calm and Wait on the Lord.**” In a way, this perfectly summarizes the theme found in Isaiah 40:31, “**but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.**”

I could go on and on about the problem that most of us have with waiting. Like the frustration that many of us experience when waiting on a slow computer. In that instance, perhaps it’s wise to remember that we are working on a computer!! We all hate waiting in the airport for a delayed flight. Perhaps in that instance it’s wise to remember that we are about to travel through the air in a large metal object!! So yes, **we probably all could learn to be a little less impatient.** Perhaps we can even turn waiting into something positive.

Being told to wait is sometimes problematic in different ways. For instance, many supporters of the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. told him to wait, because the time just wasn’t right in the country for him to march for equality. Hence his profound phrase, “Justice delayed is justice denied.” So sometimes, maybe a little impatience isn’t so bad.

Now, as far as everyday life is concerned, what about those really big things that people wait for, like renewed health, a loving relationship, a job, needed finances, etc. **What big things in life do you wait for? Within Christianity, the go-to answer has been: Be patient and wait on God’s timing.** That’s what I told myself time and time again while

awaiting a decent job after losing my career, along with thousands of others, as a petroleum geologist back in 1986. Granted, even though my waiting was undoubtedly a time of remarkable spiritual growth, I started questioning whether all things in life are really connected to "God's timing".

So I must confess that **I have a bit of a theological problem with the phrase, "wait for the Lord."** If you haven't thought about it before, a statement such as that **presupposes a belief that God constantly works behind the scenes to guide (perhaps even to control, or at least allow) all of life to unfold according to God's divine plan and timing.**

That's certainly the understanding of the ancient prophet in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. There's a growing number of Christians in our day and age, however, that no longer believe that the nature and character of God involves intervening in the created order of life in such a straightforward fashion. Saying that, I am one of those that still likes to reflect back upon the living of my life, even if it's the previous day, in a way that I hope to recognize the presence of God working in and through my life, and the life of others.

The conundrum many of us face with the line of theological thinking that supports an understanding that all things are part of God's sovereign and providential timing, is that it forces us into a position of making judgment calls of why God seems to intervene at some points in life and not in others. Speaking personally, **I no longer believe in the simple platitude that is often given as a response, "God's ways aren't our ways," or, as is the answer in this biblical passage "It's all in God's timing."** Both of those ways of thinking rely on the understanding of a God "out there" somewhere who has such control over the universe that everything is almost pre-determined or at least directed by a God who intervenes in our lives in specific ways.

If one *doesn't* believe that God intervenes to that degree, however, then to tell someone simply to "wait on the Lord" may actually do more harm than good. The result is that **if a person doesn't find their strength renewed, or have wings like eagles, or can run without getting weary, then it must be God's doing, because it's obviously not in God's timing. Or worse, we blame ourselves, thinking that we haven't done whatever we think we need to do in life in order for God to make certain needed circumstances or transformation come to pass.**

I can see, however, why the ancient Israelites needed to believe in such an interventionist God. Chapter 40 of the Book of Isaiah begins the middle section of this book. Modern biblical scholars call it "Second Isaiah." Most believe, without question, that a second prophet, one who came after the original prophet named Isaiah, wrote this portion of the Book of Isaiah. The first prophet warned the people of Judah to change their ways or risk being destroyed. They didn't, so the prophecy came to pass when the Babylonian Empire attacked them in 587 BCE.

The conquerors destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and carried the ruling elite off into exile in Babylon, where they remained for 40 years until the Persian Empire conquered the Babylonians. It was during this time of exile in a foreign land that another prophet, now called Second Isaiah, came to them with a word of hope. In beautifully poetic language, the prophet reminded the people that God is the creator of all that is, who "sits above the circle of the earth" and reminds them that all people are simply, "inhabitants that are like grasshoppers" (Isaiah 40:22).

In the prophet's understanding, there is a word of hope only when they grasp God's awesome power and their powerlessness. To become hopeful in such a time of despair and crisis begins with remembering the remarkable works of God in Israel's

history. For the exiles, captivity in Babylon was a painful reality. They were forced from their homes, scattered as the temple was laid to waste, and became refugees from the very land that held promise. They were indeed weary and had grown faint.

In the ancient world, they could have concluded that the gods of Babylon were actually stronger than their God, Yahweh. But their conclusion was that they were simply “disregarded” by the One who sits above the circle of the earth. With God located at this remote and powerful distance, we too may conclude that God is only transcendent – beyond all of us up there in the sky somewhere. But the prophet also reminds us that God exists not just “out there,” but also close to us, that God is immanent. As Isaiah recites earlier in chapter 40, the Lord God who sits above the circle of the earth is, at the very same time, the Shepherd who gently claims, gathers, names, and carries us (vv. 10-11). **The scriptures are filled with this dual understanding that God is both transcendent and immanent.**

My primarily theological question, however, is just how does that work?

Admittedly, that may be the wrong question, one that can only be answered with, “It’s just a divine Mystery.” But it’s a question that hounds progressive Christians. **Does sovereignty mean that we should just sit back and wait because God has it all under control, or that everything happens for a reason, or that it’s all simply a matter of God’s will and timing?** I am at a point in my own theological understanding of the nature and character of God that I answer those particular questions not with an emphatic no, but with a less absolute, “I don’t think so.”

And yet, I still find good news in this poetry from Second Isaiah. The good news is that there is a way for the exhausted, faint, powerless, and weary to renew their strength, to mount up with wings like eagles, to run without growing weary, and to walk without fainting. The way suggested by the poet, is to *wait* for the Creator who names and gathers the lambs and does not faint or grow weary in doing so. But again, that answer presupposes that if something doesn’t happen it’s simply not God’s will, or in God’s timing.

That’s why I ponder and question if God really is in charge of the universe in that kind of controlling way? Yet, is it not heresy to even question the sovereignty of God – if by sovereignty one means complete control over all that happens in the universe?

It is with issues like this that I mightily struggle and find hard to preach. So with me as your preacher you will not get easy answers to life’s problems, no simple statement that the cure for your weariness, for instance, is simply to wait on God to act or intervene. But let me be clear, **that doesn’t mean that God doesn’t provide us with strength and power, with renewal for our bodies, minds, and spirits. I’m just not so absolute anymore in how that all works.** Again, that may be the wrong question. Or, maybe I can get closer to figuring that out when I take a sabbatical later this year, when I will be visiting Ireland and Scotland (details to follow).

But know this if you don’t already. **College Hill is a safe place where you can bring your struggles and doubts and questions and theological conundrums about what you believe or have been taught concerning the nature and character of God. I do.**

So as we struggle together, perhaps the best version of that poster for us involves a combination. Keep Calm and Wait for the Lord, as We Carry On.

Amen.