

Wanted

Acts 2:1-21

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Pentecost

“If you wait long enough, something always comes.” This sentence keeps coming to my consciousness in recent days. It is not the word I want, but it is the one I have been given. I’d like a clearer action plan. Something like Moses gets: “Go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go.” Or the terrifying promise given to Jeremiah, “I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” Even more satisfying would be the role Nathan is tapped for, calling King David out over the incident with Bathsheba and the subsequent death of Uriah. Nathan gets to point his finger at that bastion of power who thinks he can do whatever he wants to whomever he pleases and say with disdain and conviction, “You are the man!” Then David cries in remorse and shame, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Transformation instant and real. That would be a welcomed sight in our time, wouldn’t it? Who would you like to indict with the word of the Lord these days? I have a list. What about Jael? She let loose on the commander of the Canaanite army Sisera with a tent peg through the temple. Now, that’s definitive. I know I am not supposed to harbor vengeful visions, that I am to pray for those who persecute the vulnerable but keeping all-too-satisfying thoughts of evil getting soundly beaten at bay are hard these days. Retribution seems good to me. I’d like to see some contemporary Pharaohs get what’s coming to them, locusts, and frogs optional.

I would like clarity and conviction about what God is calling me to do and say in a country riddled by bullets and a world decimated by violence and a creation we seem bent on destroying. I long for a superhero type movie ending to the stories in the headlines with not even a hint of a sequel at the end of the credits. Bad guys vanquished, good ones riding triumphantly off into the sunset. Wouldn’t that feel good? As frightening as being Moses or Jeremiah or Nathan or Jael would be, it would be freeing, too. No ambiguity. No more accusations of impotent thoughts and prayers. God said go to pharaoh, take Aaron for support, tell that evil earthly power LET MY PEOPLE GO. Gird your loins and head to the Red Sea. Wouldn’t those diving marching orders feel satisfying in our time?

But the sentence that won’t let me go is this: “If you wait long enough, something always comes.” And it is not even biblical. I read it a month or so ago in a compelling book titled, *“On Vanishing: Mortality, Dementia, and What It Means to Disappear.”* It is written by a Cooperative Baptist pastor, Lynn Casteel Harper. She currently serves at Riverside Church. But prior to that call she was a chaplain in a memory care unit. It is out of these experiences, and her own family history, that her book springs. The sentence that will not leave me is embedded in the following paragraph:

I recall a son who sat with his mother in an alcove bathed in natural light at the end of a Dementia unit hallway. He would slowly flip a photo album, balancing it between them. Sometimes he pointed to a picture and offered a word of commentary, but mostly he was quiet. His mother looked content. Almost every afternoon they sat together in this manner. The son said of the practice, "If you wait long enough, something always comes." I was the new chaplain to the place at that time, new to the immense grace found in these moments of encounter. I have since taken his wisdom as a kind of initiation, a baptism into my work with persons who have dementia. If you wait long enough something always comes. You must wait, long, enough. I tried to understand this waiting in the manner in which Thoreau understood certain still days he spent in the woods, as "not time subtracted from your life, but so much over and above your usual allowance." (Page 125-126)

How is it that when the world seems to be spinning so fast and so painfully, on a high holy day of flames and wind and crowds and miracles and proclamation and fulfilled prophecy, a word about waiting won't leave me alone?

I want something grander, more public, more demonstrative. Come on, God, don't we need Cretan and Arabs to come together? Young and old to dream the same divine dream. A display of your power so big that others can't ignore it, so odd they wonder if we're drunk and are compelled to ask, "WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?"

I'm tired of waiting for this pandemic to end and wars to cease and people of good will and good faith to triumph over evil in all its endless forms. And yet I hear a word to wait.

Harper writes early in her book about her internship and a continuing care retirement community, *"I shadowed the community's two chaplains — Maurice and Ray. I recall Maurice listening with great attention to a woman with sever dementia. While I could not make any sense of what she was saying, Maurice seemed utterly engaged. Later, he spoke to me about the importance of listening to patients, word fragments and connecting them to Latin morphemes. At that time, I found this lesson a bit tedious and far-fetched, but what strikes me now is how seriously he had taken her, how he had presumed a meaningful interaction was possible. The woman was not lost to all meaning — she needed careful and creative interlocutors and interpreters."* (Pages 9-10)

Presumed a meaningful interaction was possible. He had taken the woman seriously. He was listening with great attention. All meaning was not lost, careful and creative interlocutors and interpreters were needed. If you listen well enough and wait long enough – something always comes. The disciples gathered. They went to a religious festival as they had likely done every year of their lives. No matter that their Savior and friend had been arrested, beaten, executed, buried and risen only to ascend to heaven, leaving them once again on their own with only the instruction that they were to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, all of Samaria and to the ends of the earth. How were they accomplishing this gathered together in a room, marking fifty days from Passover, worshipping as if the world was not on fire all around them?

I wonder if they hadn't learned from their Master and Teacher and Friend that if you wait long enough, listen attentively and with expectation, presume meaning is possible and that all isn't lost, something always comes. Healing for a woman who'd exhausted her resources, been exiled from community and suffered for twelve years. Clothing and contentment to the one known his whole life as only as Legion. Paradise for the thief even as he hung on the cross. Good news from the graveyard after days of anguish, guilt and shame. If you wait long enough, something always comes.

Maybe they remembered Jesus' words of assurance to them, *"When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you will answer or what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say."*

Jesus assures his disciples: When you are most afraid, perplexed, on the cusp of or in the depths of despair, if you wait long enough something always comes. All meaning is not lost. Listen. Flip through the photos, remember the stories, we may well have forgotten who and whose we are, but God knows, and refuses to give up on us. Sit together, in the light that illumines the darkness that cannot be overcome, attend to each other, be utterly engaged in what is right in front of you, the people right beside you, the ones around you whom you find really hard to understand, and know the Spirit will come, bringing clarity out of confusion, courage alongside our fear, hope in the midst of heartache, and, yes, a prophetic word to be spoken with power perhaps by those we may well have written off as unworthy of being seen or heard, yet those desperately wanted by God.

I think we have spiritual dementia. We've forgotten how valued and valuable we are to our Creator. We don't remember we are made in God's image and called good. All of us members of one family. We search our minds for lost words like mercy and grace, mystery and beauty, peace and love. We have dream-like snippets of joy and reconciliation, but we aren't sure anymore what is real or possible. The cultural drumbeat of winning at all costs and building bigger barns and keeping people unlike us at bay, makes those of us who are to be known for our love, nearly invisible. It is as if we've vanished.

And yet we gather, in worship, just like we do every week, flipping through the Book that shows us who we are, whose we are, who we are to be, revealing that we are remembered and wanted, each of us, all of us, by our God, this one gives us both the words to speak and the ability to understand, trusting that if we wait long enough, something good, meaningful, live-giving always comes. Maybe something as dramatic as flames and wind, proclamation that build, and destroys, mighty acts of God spoken and enacted, but perhaps something as subtle as a sentence fragment uttered and heard, bits of bread shared, collected and distributed – bizarre acts that show the world that everyone is wanted by God and therefore will be loved and cared for by us.

This week, I wanted a different word, an explosive, Pentecost-worthy, earth shattering, word, but what I heard was this: If you wait long enough, something always comes. And for

those of us who follow the One who said to his disciples: "I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." We wait eagerly, attentively knowing all meaning is not lost knowing it is the Spirit who will come and give us the words, the courage, the understanding and the power to make sure no one vanishes because we want one another, the people of Asia, Egypt and Pontus, Jews, Arabs, visitors from Rome, old, young, rich, poor, he, she, they, all flesh, everywhere, everyone, with the same desire God wants each and everyone of us, creating a holy community where reconciliation, not retribution, is the norm, a God-called-very-good world where all are seen, heard, remembered, valued, and loved. Perhaps a Pentecost-worthy word, after all.