



Waiting Watchfully

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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My eight-year-old son, Seth, hates to wait. To tell him he's got ten minutes until dinner, no, he can't have a snack, is like telling him that Christmas is postponed until August. And waiting for some big event, like the Diamondbacks game last September, well...good luck.

The hardest part of waiting, when you're a child, is that adults seem to have no concept of how impossible it is to do. I can remember this. And so, when I tell my children that two weeks are two weeks, there's nothing Mommy or I can do to change that, I hear the anguish in their voices when they say, "I can't wait that long!" And I understand when they push back at my standard, adult reply: "You can, and you'll survive. You'll just have to...fourteen days are fourteen days long, and they will take their fourteen days whether you want them to or not." That's a lesson that will take its own time to learn.

Someday, maybe too soon, will come that little edge of detachment, the ability to occupy yourself with other things, that will give them back that time, allow them to appreciate time for itself instead of making it an impediment to enjoyment. To enjoy the wait, the anticipation, as something special, all by itself.

In fact, we've strung together a lifetime of little waits that have covered over the primary one: waiting for the promised time of peace and goodwill to finally arrive. And really, it's not a bad thing, entirely – generations have gone to their reward waiting for that time. Waiting's a part of life, exciting and sad, delightful and painful. Waiting for that wedding day. Waiting through the night in an emergency room. Waiting for a vacation. Waiting for the pain to be over. Valerie, having retired in August, is still waiting for things to calm down! Waiting, how we do it, is a part of who each of us is. Our family's had its share of joyful and painful waitings, too.

But they don't always turn out the way we expect. Many times Valerie has gotten increasingly worried as my usual time to return home has passed...she's imagined

horrific accidents, that I've been attacked or hurt, or that something terrible has happened and I'm off helpless somewhere. But just as she's slipping into panic, I've always walked in the door, blissfully unaware of her anxiety.

And sometimes waiting can dull us to the signs that what we're waiting for is here. Like being early for a flight, sitting down at the gate with a good book, knowing all is well, maybe even dozing off for a few minutes... only to look up and see your gate's been changed to another terminal, and you've only got ten minutes to get there. Sometimes we miss things altogether.

Jeremiah is one Biblical figure I've never had any desire to be. A prophet's work is not pleasant, no matter how interesting it might sound to be in such close relationship with God. To his credit, Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet: he did not like what he had to say, didn't want to say it. He told the leaders of his country, Judah, that very bad things were going to happen to their nation; he said that God was weary of their evil and lies. He told them that their enemies were going to defeat them, and that the best thing they could do was surrender, just give up, let their enemies conquer them and let their punishment come. That kind of talk is treason – and while we might allow people to speak like that in our modern, free society, we don't exactly welcome folks like that or their message.

Remarkably, Jeremiah isn't killed for the things he says. Oh, he's abused, threatened, heckled, and thoroughly ignored. He's imprisoned, and attempts are made on his life: but not only is he spared, he keeps on speaking what God is saying to him, seeing what God is doing: he sees the truth of the events around him, that others insist aren't happening. He's waiting, too: waiting for disaster, for invasion, for the destruction of his nation, the scattering of his people. Doom and gloom! In fact, the word for such gloomy speech is "jeremiad." And as he speaks the words of our lesson this morning, he's waiting in prison.

But what he says is not what you'd expect from someone who sees his nation's destruction approaching from inside a prison cell – Jeremiah sees so much more. He sees that "in those days", something totally different will happen. He sees something new and fresh and beautiful springing from the family tree of the kings of Judah. He sees the decadent, deceitful city of Jerusalem transformed into a display of God's goodness, its name changed to "God is my Righteousness" – Yahweh-yireh.

Still, for Jeremiah, "those days" are far off: he tells his conquered and exiled countrymen and women what we tell our kids: keep on doing what needs to be done while you're waiting – the future will get here in its own time, not yours.

"Those days" are *these days*, for Christians: the new growth from David's family tree is Jesus Christ. Though we don't yet see the literal establishment of the new city of safety and salvation in Jerusalem: we have to look for it the way Jeremiah looked for God's work, God's word. We are called to be prophets for our time, waiting, but waiting watchfully: watching God's activity around us.

My sophomore year of college, I lived in an apartment – used to be servant's quarters – in the Dean of Students' house. So, I could have a cat – and so, I had a cat, named Ta.

Ta was a Himalayan, a long-haired cat like a Persian, but with Siamese markings, unusually, in shades of black and dark grey. Naturally, when I returned to dorm life the next year, Ta became my parents' cat.

She was well-behaved – never ate people food, only cat food – and so my Mom and Dad gave her the run of the house, to the point of having a towel for her to lie on right on the breakfast room table, where she could watch the squirrels and birds, and quiver in excitement at their antics, inches from her face.

Ta spent hours there, day after day. It was her place. And what did she do? She waited. For what? I don't know; at first it may have been in the expectation that somehow she'd be able to catch one of those tantalizing creatures; but that must have passed at some point. Even instinct must become dull after years of unfulfilled expectation; she never had a chance to get them. Only the occasional twitch of her tail would tell us that she was still alive. But she lay there and studied their every move.

She waited. Just waited. And watched. That waiting was one of the joys in her life. That waiting was her preferred activity! She never fulfilled her feline dream; wouldn't have known what to do with a bird if she caught it. But she still watched, and knew the signs of what she was programmed to see: that this bird's almost close enough, that that squirrel's too far out of reach, that they all go after that bird seed from the left side instead of the right. And not just that, but that they were worth watching, watching them was what she was supposed to do, instinctively.

We have an instinct, too – one put in us by our creator, one that is finely tuned to wait for him, to respond to him; it's one we just don't pay much attention to, because we've figured out other ways to make time pass while we're waiting. We're waiting for the days when the world is as it's supposed to be, when there's peace on earth and goodwill and no one will have to wait again. But we're watching, too – it's just that we aren't always seeing what we're looking at, and we've forgotten what we're waiting for.

But Jeremiah didn't forget. In the midst of tragedy and destruction, which he saw better than anyone else, he saw what was to come in the distant future: healing and restoration. A time when the world is as it should be, without pain, suffering, or hunger – or injustice. He looked at what everyone around him saw, but was able to truly see what God was doing, what God would do. That's what made him a prophet. We have the same skills, and we can be prophets, too.

Look around you. We're all waiting, too, like Jeremiah. We are waiting for God. But God is already here, in the corners and shadows – even out in the open; we're just so used to seeing him that we don't notice. But if we're honest, if we look deep inside, we'll see find the same suppressed excitement as Ta looking out the window at the birds and squirrels, the same agonizing anxiety as Seth waiting for the next big thing, that empty place inside us aching to be filled. And God is showing himself, if we have eyes to see, feeding us bits and pieces to satisfy our hunger, to grow and become prophets able to see God's work in and around us, able to point out to others where to find food for themselves, for their souls.

Advent isn't just about waiting for Christmas, or for Jesus to be born – as if that happens every year! – it's about pointing to the signs of God among us, and to that great day when “the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.”