

This past week prompted many memories. But this past Wednesday, November 22nd coaxed deep remembrances. It was for me – as I imagine it was for many, a time of remembering where you were on November 22, 1963. I can still see the room I was in and hear a tearful elementary school principal as she announced the shooting of President Kennedy. Although not fully aware of what I was hearing, and what was going on around me; I knew that the world was shifting right there. We got ourselves ready to leave school, and those who needed to, waited for the school busses to arrive to take us home.

My mother worked in town at my uncle's hardware store, so I walked uptown. Next door to my uncle's store was the Zenith TV Shop. I noticed a crowd of people standing outside the shop. As I got closer, I realized they were all watching TV sets, turned on, with news broadcasts showing pieces of this tragic story as it was unfolding. This scenario played itself out once I got home, too. My mother went into the living room, turned on the TV, and we watched the world change.

There was not a world wide web. Cell phones were in the imaginations of inventors. We couldn't text. We couldn't send an email. We couldn't reach out to a web link search engine. Our only options were to watch, to listen, and to wait. I'm guessing my mother would have called her mother to talk about what was going on. Both of my parents might have reached out to their siblings. I don't know, because all I remember is sitting in front to the TV for long periods of time, trying to figure out exactly what was happening in front of me.

We managed to carve out some normalcy during this time. But, from Friday through Monday, we watched, and we waited. And even when the funeral had ended on that Monday, we continued to wait. We had no quick answers. We had only questions, and fears, and anxious feelings of uncertainty. Even at my young age, I knew our world had been changed.

Moments like this would happen again and again throughout the decades following the assassination of President Kennedy. Eventually, technology would produce the means to get these events to us faster and from a world perspective. Even with advanced technology, 22 years ago, when the Twin Towers were destroyed, every bit of news fell on expectant ears and breaking hearts. Yet, in the 21st century we would still be held to periods of waiting – wanting more, but not having any way to retrieve answers.

We are almost 4 years into a time when our world was changed, and our lives were forced to relearn and sometimes release things we'd known most of our lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us new ways to wait:

It taught us that waiting is often accompanied by uncertainty. That patience is important. It taught us appreciation for the present. And it is essential to be flexible and resilient in the face of the unknown. It reminded us of our global connectedness.

We continue to witness the human capacity for adapting to change and the resilience to navigate through challenging times. It highlighted the need for prioritizing healthcare infrastructure, research, and preparedness for future health crises. This experience emphasized the role of technology as a lifeline, connecting people even when physically apart.

The pandemic prompted many individuals to reflect on their values and priorities. Waiting for a resolution led to a reconsideration of what truly matters in life, fostering a greater emphasis on well-being, relationships, and community.

Waiting for things to return to how they had been. For some semblance of “normal”. Eventually realizing what had been- will never be again. COVID changed the world. COVID isolation changed our world. Now we wait for new ways of being in the world. Baby steps.

Waiting is never easy.

It irritates us. It inconveniences us. It steals our precious time. We have created responses as a means to deal with waiting. It's been a long time . . . but, in academia, students could leave after fifteen minutes if their instructor did not show up for class. (This, of course, was long before cell phones and computers.) Today this issue could be resolved by a text or an email. I have known people who walk out of a medical appointment if they're still waiting to be seen after fifteen minutes. (However . . . This may no longer be the reality. Between scripted and timed visits with your primary care person. Waiting may be a moot point.) Aggravation around medical appointments centers around the inability to get an appointment in a decent amount of time. It's not uncommon to hear, “I'm still waiting to get an appointment with my specialist!” Waiting can ignite anxious feelings.

The evolution of waiting for professionals has taught me to make flexibility my partner. And to bring with me myriad distractions to keep my attention away from the irritations I'd feel while waiting to be helped!

I often arrive with my backpack loaded with whatever book I am reading, my iPad, and/or the day's newspapers!

It can add to the anxiety if this is a medical appointment that includes a follow-up consultation with a doctor. The waiting is the hardest part. Or so we make it out to be!

All this thinking takes a back seat when I place my self-absorbed feelings into context around current events happening in our world.

The Geneva Academy is a place for global education and research around international law relating to situations of armed conflict, long-drawn-out violence, and protection of human rights. There, in Geneva Switzerland, this gathering of learners looks every day at geographical locations in the midst of some type of battle. Their world view includes far more than the two most often reported in the news: The Ukraine and the Israel-Palestine conflicts.

Waiting for resolution is an everyday reality for these men and women who wish to change the world.

The end to fighting around the world, the immense numbers of lives lost in the name of warring ideologies, and the uncounted people missing. We wait for peaceful endings and reunions of families.

It is not just the world that is waiting. Many of us wait and wonder, around issues of health and family, finances, and our future. Our professional and personal lives are filled with times of waiting. And in spite of every bit of technology available to us, sometimes the waiting must endure times of murky possibilities and drawn-out silences. Sometimes a search engine cannot give you the answer you need.

Today's text from Isaiah is something I would, with ministerial license, call: "Waiting Interrupted"! The prophet Isaiah is one of the books most used for readings during the season of Advent. We're often bathed in words interpreted as messianic prophecies.

Isaiah 7

"Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel."

Isaiah 9

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Words utilized in Handel's Messiah.

Isaiah 11

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; . . ." a reference to the Messiah, who is a descendant of Jesse (and therefore of David).

Today's text is sometimes mistaken to speak about people's readiness to welcome the Messiah, and what this Messiah will do.

“ . . . prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

“ . . . the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, . . . “

“ . . . the Lord God comes with might . . . ”

“He will feed his flock . . . he will gather the lambs . . . gently lead the mother sheep.”

Beautiful images, indeed. Yet, historically, this text from Isaiah has little to do with the Messiah’s arrival, and everything to do with the end of the Israelites’ exile in Babylon! The Israelites lived in exile after being driven from Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and then saw their sacred Temple destroyed, and more people expelled under king Nebuchadnezzar. It wasn’t until almost 50 years later that King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed the Israelites to return home and rebuild their temples. It was a total of almost 90 years from the Babylonians’ exiling and destroying the Israelites until the Second Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. They lived for nine decades, waiting!

The return for the Israelites, to their homeland, happened in waves. Historically guessed at 23 years between the time of Cyrus’ conquest and the completion of the Second Temple. It was during this wave of people returning that what you hear this morning is believed to have been written. What they wrote reflected their being set free from exile.

The community of writers wrote words of hope. Future thinking words expressing freedom to move about and return to their homelands. Their words reflected an acknowledgment of God’s presence in their release. They were hope-filled announcements of a God with whom they shared a life-long covenant.

Isaiah’s text reflects the joy and anticipation of returning home. A homecoming celebrating God’s faithfulness and commitment to the covenant made with Abraham. Rebuilding the Temple would, once again, bring God home to God’s people.

The messages in this text bring about a vision of God’s blessings, justice, and the building of God’s kingdom.

Let us begin Advent with open hearts. Make light, your heart’s heaviness. Make way for the revelation of the glory of God.

In the coming weeks, give yourself permission to pause and remember times when you have been in exile. Yours may never have known the severities of expulsion or kidnapping. Yours may have been emotional or spiritual times of exile. Disconnections from people, from places, from life itself. Distancing from God. And

if you are willing, remember those periods of waiting. Not just the anxious mysteries, but the unknowns that did not allow clear visions around breaking out and getting free.

If you choose to take the time to remember a moment, or moments of personal exile . . . then reward yourself with re-reading this morning's text. Hear the voice that cries out. Hear that voice assure you that all passageways will be opened to your journey forward. Nothing will hide the glory of God. From mountains to valleys all will hear the good news that your waiting is ending. Your souls will be fed. Your longings will be satisfied in God's loving embrace.

And when you return to this passage in the 40th chapter of Isaiah, open it to its fullness. Begin with the very first verse: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

In Advent we are reminded that God continues to walk alongside us. A journey begun from the establishment of this created order. Our deepest comfort and greatest joy is feeling God's presence . . . providing, protecting, and guiding us with gentleness. True comfort, indeed.

May the weight of your waiting be lifted.