

Not Slow...Just Patient

2 Peter 3:8-15
Rev. John Allen

Nobody quite knows how to get under your skin like a sibling.

It is an often repeated story in my family that when I was 6, and my brother Tom was 4, we were out for dinner as a family, and I was impatient.

I had done all the coloring on the placemat. Folded up my straw wrapper every which way. And the food still had not come. I was squirming, and my mother very kindly reminded me, "John. Sometimes, we have to wait."

Pushed to my limit I finally groaned: "I hate waiting!"

And my little brother sat up as straight as he could. Painted this little angelic smile across his face, and after one last little glance at me said: "Mom, I like to wait."

And while I am sure that his more restrained behavior was probably preferred by my parents that event.

He of course, was lying. He did not like to wait, any more than I did. Nobody likes to wait.

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In the first few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers were waiting. They felt as sure as they could be that Jesus would be coming back soon. In a cloud of glory. To set the world right once, and for all.

Most of them expected it would happen in their lifetimes.

And when it didn't, and the years stretched into decades, some people started to lose hope. And worse, some outside their community started to make fun of them.

It is to this group that the words of today's scripture are pointed. And there are two defenses.

First, a sort of philosophy of time. Remember that in God's sight one day is indistinguishable from 1000 years. So what feels like an eternity to us, might feel like a blink of God's proverbial eye. That is one way to look at it. It's an interesting one. We might take solace in knowing that understood this way, the promise still lies before us, that later doesn't mean never. That "soon" just means something different to God, then it does to us.

That is an important reminder, and one that I suggest we hold in our hearts.

Then the second. "God is not slow about God's promise, they way you think of slowness, rather God is being *patient with you*."

Not slow. But patient.

It's a bit pointed. But seen this way God's timeline for salvation is a sort of mercy. God has decided to be fashionably late.

God is not slow. Rather, God is giving us a little extra time, to get things in order, to tidy up our spirits, and clear out our cluttered hearts.

It might feel like we are waiting for God—scripture says—but what if in fact it is God who is waiting, patiently, for us?

You may not be waiting for Christ to return on a cloud of cosmic glory, tearing open the heavens and ushering in some unmistakable new order.

But I know you are waiting. I know that your hearts ache and grieve at a broken and pain-filled world. I know that you cry out for God to put an end to the wars that clamor on our televisions. I know that you long for God to silence the guns that rob us of our neighbors. I know that more than once you have wondered to yourself: “how long God? How long must we wait.”

With our grief soaked hearts, it may be hard to hear what scripture speaks to us this morning.

It might feel like we are waiting for God, but what if in fact it is God who is waiting, patiently, for us?

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In a few weeks on Christmas we will be celebrating that the very fullness of God was born into our world as a child. And we will remember that even as a brand-new-born the busy world could not make space for his birth, and so he lay in a bed of straw attended by animals.

Perhaps God is waiting—patiently—for us finally clear away the clutter of our self-important busy-ness and make enough room for something astonishingly new to be born in our midst.

We remember that when Jesus spoke to his own family, and his own community, he heard time and time again, “that isn’t how we do things.” That even those who were closest to him had their minds so clouded by certainty and their hearts so hardened by habit that many could not embrace his radical wisdom.

Perhaps God is waiting—patiently—for us to admit all that we do not know, for us to open our minds to the possibility that we may, each of us, be hopelessly wrong, and irretrievably lost.

We remember that when Jesus ate with sinners and outcasts, he was derided and threatened.

Perhaps God is waiting—patiently—for our hearts to be more tender toward the poor and marginalized.

And of course we remember that for all his trouble, when it came to the end, the powers of our world conspired against him, and executed Jesus on a cross.

Perhaps God is waiting—patiently—for us to tear down the crosses that still dot the forsaken hilltops of our world, where the poor and the weak suffer in anonymity and where the powerful silence the voices that threaten the status quo.

It might feel like we are waiting for God, but what if in fact it is God who is waiting, patiently, for us?

And in this—we receive this word of hope. For this same passage tells us that we are waiting for—and *hastening*—the coming of God’s promise.

It is a rather bold claim. But there it is. Waiting for—and hastening.

That is to say that even in our waiting we are not without agency.

And if we want to hasten the day when every tear is wiped away from every eye, we might start by grabbing a box of tissues, and tending to the grief of those we love most.

If we want to hasten the day when the nations study war no more, we may want to pick up a mighty pen to insist that those we entrust with power seek first the paths of peace.

If we want to hasten the day in which the bow is broken and the spear is shattered, we might start by melting the weapons of our day into plowshares.

If we want to hasten the day when people neither hunger, nor thirst, we might start by sharing the bounty of our own lives with abandon.

The practice of our faith demands this sort of expectant posture. That we are waiting yes for something extraordinary that God has promised *and* we are dedicating the full measure of our lives to prepare the way for that promise, and yes, even to hasten its coming.

One way that we practice this expectant posture is at this table. This table at which we will soon gather.

And I know you had to wait a little longer than usual today. Sometimes, we have to wait.

This table is a place where we look back and remember how Christ was present with us on this earth, how he fed his friends, and set their hearts ablaze. He taught us how to live. He showed us what to do.

This table is also a place where we look ahead, we look ahead to God's promise with the bold hope that the day is coming, it is coming, when will all gather as we do at this table, with Christ as our host, and the whole family of creation our kindred.

At this table all are welcome to come in peace, we do this to prepare the way for the coming day when the whole world will know peace.

At this table we encounter broken bodies, and blood shed, so that in our honest accounting we might hasten the day when intractable animosity will break and crumble like bread, and only gladness and joy shall be poured forth so abundantly.

At this table we are fed, body and soul, and sent forth to do the same for all people, so that the day might come when no empty stomachs will growl, and no empty hearts will weep.

We eat this bread, and drink this cup, and do everything else that we do in this place, as part of our work to prepare our hearts and our world for that time.

And God is patient with our preparations. But I don't imagine that God likes the waiting any more than we do.

Ours are not the only hearts that long for the world to be re-made. God is longing for it too.

And however fervently as we might cry out to God, "how long must we wait?"

We should listen just as intently, to hear God asking us the same thing.