

First Christian Church
“When the Party is Over”
Psalm 40:1-11

Oreo is the only dog at this time that can do what I call the long/short walk around the neighborhood. That means walking down Avenue K to the park, and through the park, over to Alep Street, and then down that street back to our house. It takes roughly half an hour depending upon how interested Oreo is in the sights and sounds; and Skylar's leg is healing on schedule so soon he'll be able to join us. Wednesday night on the walk I noticed all the Christmas lights have been removed from the houses. All that remained was a lone Christmas tree in one of the houses on Alep Street. It seems the party is over, and with the chaos and merriment of the season behind us what better time could there be for a psalm?

Psalm 40 taken from The Message begins like this, “I waited and waited and waited for God. At last he looked; finally he listened.” Don't we all feel like that sometimes? Like we're not quite sure God is paying any attention. It makes me think of the story in my book of children's fables about the cat who goes fishing:

“What a glorious vision I see in my head!” said the Cat as he went to the riverbank. “I see a large fat fish on a china plate, resting in an ocean of lemon juice and butter sauce.” He licked his whiskers in anticipation. The Cat put a worm on a hook and threw his line into the water. He waited for the fish to bite. An hour went by but nothing happened. “What a vision I see!” said the Cat. “A fish on a china plate, lying in a lake of lemon juice and butter sauce.” Another hour passed and nothing happened. “I see a vision!” said the Cat. “A small fish on a china plate, sprinkled with lemon juice and dribbles of butter sauce.” Many hours later the Cat said, “I can still see a vision. A small, thin fish on a china plate with a little drop of lemon juice and a tiny dab of butter sauce.

After a long time the Cat said sadly, “There is a new vision in my head. I see no fish. I see no lemon juice and not a bit of butter sauce. I see a china plate. It is as empty as my stomach. The Cat was just about to leave the riverbank when he felt a sudden tug on the line. He pulled a large, fat fish out of the river. The Cat ran home and fried the fish. He put it on a china plate. He poured a whole ocean of lemon juice and butter sauce all over it. “What a glorious supper!” said the Cat.

Notice how the cat's vision diminishes over time. His imagination runs free as it creates a vision of a more than ample fish covered in lemon juice and butter. Toward the end of the story he's left with nothing but an empty plate and an empty stomach, and just before he's about to give up the fish strikes the line! “I waited and waited and waited for God. At last he looked; finally he listened.” You see what the crucial element is in both stories? It's all about patience. Without patience the cat would have never caught the big fish, and without patience the psalmist could not report that God finally looked and listened. But the waiting is so hard, it seems like we always want to jump the gun.

We're constantly a step or two or three ahead of God and his divine schedule. We have our own schedule, our own desires and needs. We want what we want, and much of the time we want it right now. But it doesn't work that way. Jesus said, according to Eugene Peterson, “Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life – to God – is vigorous and requires total attention.” (Matthew 7:14, The Message)

The definition for “vigorous” is to be full of energy. In this sense being patient with God does not mean inactivity. Like in Advent we are waiting for the Lord, but we don't wait passively. We are actively waiting in prayer and worship and in loving acts of kindness. So being patient with God does not mean doing nothing. But Peterson also describes that the way to life and God “requires total attention.” We have to stay focused on what God wants us to do as opposed to what we want to do. We always want to jump the gun - take care of the situation - resolve the problem, and move a step closer to our goal! But if you make your goal patience itself, then everything changes. Now you're waiting on the Lord. Your no longer being the master of your own fate. Now your trusting in grace, and that's the real goal we should all be working on. A recent Secret Place devotion expressed this same idea:

There's something about freshly fallen snow. Pristine in it's winter finery, earth's plain face becomes beautiful. Overnight, winter's drab landscape changes to a white fairyland. The dead, brown grass disappears under a snowy blanket, and barren trees wear sparkling white accessories. Under this blanket, the world becomes quiet and still. If the snowy blanket is deep enough, activities and work come to a standstill. Many rejoice in the lull from routine activities. People stay cocooned in their homes instead of scurrying to numerous activities.

When I allow my soul to be blanketed in God's Spirit, the same changes occur. What was drab and colorless becomes white and sparkling as God shines light and love. Even though the world around me may spin out of control, the Holy Spirit allows my soul to be still, calm, and restful. Just as the blanket of snow insulates the earth, God insulates me against the clamor and coldness of the world and keeps me properly focused.

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Moving on with the psalm the psalmist describes how God influenced him after he looked and listened, “He pulled me out of the ditch, pulled me up from the deep mud. He stood me up on a solid rock to make sure I wouldn't slip. He taught me how to sing the latest God-song, a praise song to our God. More and more people are seeing this: they enter the mystery, abandoning themselves to God.” This reminds me of the Apostle Paul when he says, “For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:15) This message of hope is important to keep in our hearts and minds as we enter into this time a of radical social and political change. We need to remember that God's Spirit continues to move in peoples lives, and often increases because of change and the challenges it presents.

Marianne Williamson speaks to this in her book “Illuminata – A Return to Prayer:”

It is, in fact, the darkness of the world that calls up the light. Just as a sloppy room makes you wish someone would clean it, and a messy room might even make you contemplate paying someone to clean it, a severely messy room makes you get up and do it yourself, for the mess is impairing your ability to live happily there. Then there is also desire, where as before there was mere unfocused “Wouldn't it be nice.” This is the motivation of a civilization that reinvents itself. We want to do what we have not done. We want to produce not just marvelous machines or marvelous systems, but marvelous people who bring down the light.

We are in this sense, no different than people in any other age. From the trough in the water comes the rising of the wave. We are the wave now rising, and the fact that we have been so low increases the chances that our surge will be filled with awesome power.

There is, at this time, a reaching out to the species, through deep subterranean caverns of divine action. God calls to us and our listening grows. He has always called but we have rarely listened. Now, as our yearning reaches critical mass, there are millions of human hands cupped to human ears, listening for the sounds of God. We have heard something beautiful. We want to hear more. (p.28-29)

In times of great change we need to be attuned to what God is doing in the world, and always keep in mind that, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) In faith we know God's Spirit is flowing through people's lives, changing them, and bringing them closer to him, often without them even being aware of it. Marianne claims millions of people are now listening for the sounds of God, which ties directly into what the psalmist has to say next, “You've opened my ears so I can listen.” And what keeps our ears closed? Are they full of gunk and wax? Are we so distracted by the allures of culture that we can't hear God reaching out to us? Are we simply too frightened to listen when the ground beneath us is shifting?

The other night I was watching television and two commercials, one right after the other, encapsulated for me the absurdity our culture can display. The first commercial was promoting Covered California, and the need for health insurance. In the commercial you are witnessing things from the persons point of view who has just had a heart attack or some similar kind of catastrophic medical event. You see the e-squad shining the light in their eyes, and one of the paramedics is putting an oxygen mask on the patient, and you see him nod his head indicating to the patient that he needs the mask. Soon the patient is loaded into the ambulance, and you watch the doors close. The caption to it all is something like, “Life can change in an instant and you better have health insurance.”

The next commercial, which immediately followed, was a Carl's Jr.'s advertisement about how they are selling four of their food items for four dollars. Next came a picture of the food items which amounted to a big, juicy hamburger with all the fix-ins, fries, a coke and something else. And I had to wonder how many people make the connection between eating food like that and ending up in the back of an ambulance. The world as a whole is not concerned about our health and well-being. We have to be concerned for ourselves. We have to make the choices, because no one is going to do it for us. And often times were being persuaded, seduced or led to make the wrong ones. Which is why it is imperative we know what the right choices are at any given moment. We become aware of the right and righteous choices by listening to what God has to say.

So the psalmist tells God, “I'm coming. I read in your letter what you wrote about me. And I'm coming to the party you're throwing for me.' That's when God's Word entered my life, became part of my very being.” It's not enough to simply hear what God has to say. We also have to let it seep down into the depths of our soul. This is where too many of us get off the boat. Too many fall short of letting the Word really impact them at a deeper level. We can pray for others and ourselves, and that is all good; but real spiritual change, transformation, only happens at the deeper levels of our being. You might say that's what real religion is all about. It always seems to come down to choices and the courage to make them. Love is always a choice. Indeed, God has made his Spirit to take up residence within us just like the scriptures say, “He yearns jealousy over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us.” (James 4:5b) But that spirit needs food, it needs to be nourished, and God's Word is the nourishment it requires.

Because God's Word has entered the psalmists life, and became a part of his very being, he can't help but share God with everyone. The psalm closes with these words, “I've preached you to the whole congregation, I've kept back nothing God – you know that. I didn't keep the news of your ways secret,

didn't keep it to myself. I told it all, how dependable you are, how thorough. I didn't hold back pieces of love and truth for myself alone. I told it all, let the congregation know the whole story.”

Tomorrow, as a nation, we recognize and celebrate the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. This may have been one of his favorite psalms? Like the psalmist he didn't hold anything back either! He told the whole congregation. He told the whole world, and he still is telling us about God's passion for justice and unity through the printed word, film clips and the people that he touched so deeply during the Civil Rights era. One of those people who marched with him is Representative John Lewis of Georgia. Last week he testified before the confirmation hearing of Senator Jeff Sessions who is the candidate for Attorney General. This is what he said in the hearing:

It took a massive, well organized, nonviolent dissent for the Voting Rights Act to become law. It required criticism of this great nation, and this law, to move toward a greater sense of equality in America. We had to sit in. We had to stand in. We had to march. And that's why more than 50 years ago, a group of unarmed citizens, black and white, gathered on March 7th, 1965, in orderly and peaceful nonviolent fashion, to walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to dramatize to the nation, and the world, that we wanted to register to vote, wanted to become participants in the democratic process.

We were beaten, tear gassed. Left bloody, some of us unconscious. Some of us had concussions. Some of us almost died on that bridge. But the Congress responded, and the Congress passed the Voting Rights Act and it was signed into law on August 6th, 1965. We have come a distance. We made progress, but we're not there yet. There are forces that want to take us back to another place. We don't want to go back, we want to go forward.

As the late A. Philip Randolph, who was the dean of the march on Washington in 1963, often said, “Maybe our forefathers and foremothers all came to this great land in different ships, but we're all in the same boat now.” It doesn't matter how Senator Sessions may smile, how friendly he may be, how he may speak to you. We need someone who is going to stand up, to speak up, and speak out for the people that need help. For people who have been discriminated against, and it doesn't matter if their black, white, Latino, Asian American, or Native American. Whether they are straight or gay, Muslim, Christian, or Jew. We all live in the same house, the American house. We need someone as attorney general who is going to look out for all of us, not just some of us.

I expect Senator Sessions will be confirmed by Congress and will become our next Attorney General. For those of us who value equality and justice this is just another indication of the struggle which lies before us. The years ahead may test our faith in a way we have never been tested before. When we make patience the goal, rather than our own selfish pursuits, it changes everything. When the ground beneath you shifts, as it is doing, the gospel way of coping is to allow yourself to be changed from within. And the Apostle says, “We continue to shout our praise even when were hemmed in with troubles, because we know how trouble can develop *passionate patience* in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next.” (Romans 5:3-5, The Message)

Rev. Mitch Becker
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