

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“JOY IN THE WAITING”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 1: 57-80

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 22, 2024
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 1: 57-80

The Birth of John the Baptist

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” 61 They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Zechariah's Prophecy

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us

in the house of his servant David,

70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

78 By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Joy in the Waiting

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

There was once a man found no joy in waiting. He hated the lines at the checkout counters, the traffic, didn't like to wait for anything at all. So, one day, he prayed, "God, I'm tired of waiting. Can you make it so I never have to wait for anything ever again?" To the man's surprise, God replied, "Sure! Consider it done." The next day, the man woke up and noticed that things were different. His coffee machine brewed instantly, no waiting. The shower was immediately hot. At the store, the lines disappeared as soon as he approached. Even red lights turned green the moment his car got near. And he thought to himself, "this is amazing!"

But then things got weird. At the airport, he got on a plane, and it immediately took off, but it did so before the other passengers and even some of the crew were on board. When he ordered a pizza, it appeared instantly, but the dough wasn't cooked. He planted flowers in his garden, and they grew to full bloom in seconds, but they wilted just as fast. The man realized that waiting, while frustrating, is, at times, necessary. A homecooked meal at Christmastime doesn't just appear. It may involve multiple grocery store runs, the table must be set, and the food needs to be prepared. And distant family doesn't just walk in the door. They save their money, they request time off from work, they make their travel plans, and, as some of you know better than others, they sometimes must deal with delays! When we stop and think about it, waiting really is central to the human experience and, if we are honest with ourselves, there's not a person here this morning who is not waiting for something.

I received a text earlier today from Joe Harvard who served as our Interim Pastor a few years ago, and he shared that his wife Carlisle's transition from this life to the next seems imminent. Still, he has to wait. I know there are some among us who are waiting to see how a disease will respond to treatment. There is no quick answer to that question and so they wait. Perhaps someone is waiting for a loved one to return home from military service, or maybe there is a mom or dad among us who can't wait for their children to grow up or maybe there is someone here who would do anything to become a parent. Try as we may, we just can't snap our fingers and make waiting a thing of the past. It is not easy to wait, and few people enjoy doing so.

I mean, who among us, at this time of the year, shops for 10 minutes, stands in line for another 30 minutes, and then says to the salesclerk: "You know what? That felt good...I needed to slow down a little bit." When I was a child I almost jumped out of my skin in anticipation of Santa Clause. On Christmas Eve, I would set out a plate of cookies and a glass of milk, and then I would go to my room, climb into my bed, and fight to keep my eyes open for as long as I could. Even as an adult I have never really learned to enjoy waiting, and yet that is exactly what the church continues to ask us to do during these final hours of Advent.

Throughout the season of Advent, we have talked at length about the importance of waiting. We have talked about it not only in terms of the Christ whose birth we wait to celebrate, but also the importance of waiting for Jesus' return, his second coming. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of waiting. In fact, our choice of hymns this morning indicates that in some ways we can't wait. I don't know about you, but I'm ready for Christmas to be here; but, alas, this is the fourth Sunday of Advent, we are still three days away from Christmas!

If we were placing an order in the drive through, many of us would ask that our Christmas be supersized. We'd ask for a side of this and a side of that but hold the Advent. We don't need any more of that! Still, the church, in her wisdom, invites us to wait just a little bit longer before we celebrate the birth of our Savior. And we are not alone. When Luke tells the Christmas story, it is all about waiting. There is no such thing as instant childbirth. And in the Christmas story as Luke tells it, we hear not of one but of two pregnancies. Of course, the pregnancy that we most often talk about at Christmastime is the pregnancy of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who like all mothers, as near as we can tell, had to wait a full 9 months for the baby conceived in her womb to be born. But Mary wasn't the only one who had to wait. So did Elizabeth and Zechariah. And as a couple, if they sound to you very much like Abraham and Sara of the Old Testament, you're not alone?

Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were both older adults and the Bible tells us that Elizabeth was barren. Imagine all those years of waiting, waiting for a child that never seemed to come...that is, until now. Zechariah, as if playing the role of Sarah in the Old Testament, he expressed his disbelief, and he reminds the angel of just how old they are, as if God may have made a mistake. For his lack of faith, we are told that Zechariah, from that moment up until 8 days after John's birth, he couldn't speak. All he could do, like Elizabeth, was wait. There is really only one reference to Elizabeth's pregnancy in the Bible but it is a beautiful one. When her relative Mary came to visit her, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. Eventually that child is born, and shortly after his birth Elizabeth let's it be known that his name is John. That's where our New Testament Lesson picks up this morning.

Now, we need to know that naming the child John was a bit of a surprise. You see, at that time in history, theirs being very much a patriarchal society, the expectation was that the child would be named after his father. He'd naturally be named something like "Zechariah, Jr." or seeing as Zechariah was a priest, maybe they would choose to name him after the great priest Aaron. "Aaron bar Zechariah," meaning Aaron, son of Zechariah. That would have been a good name too! The people who were present at the time of the baby's naming, they turned to Zechariah. Elizabeth had said it, but they needed to hear it from him and so Zechariah grabbed a writing-tablet and wrote: "His name is John." Soon thereafter, Zechariah's voice was restored and listen to the first words that that came from his mouth: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them." And so it happens that in the end the wait was worth it! Not the wait in and of itself, mind you, but the joy in knowing that God had not stopped working toward the redemption of his people.

Sometimes we get that backwards, don't we? We mistakenly presume that we are the ones who bring about the future. That we are the ones who initiate redemption. Friends, this is one of life's most important lessons and the only way we will ever learn it is if we also learn to wait! Ah, but waiting is not a passive thing. There is the kind of waiting that involves sitting on our hands, but there is also the kind of waiting marked by waiting on God and one another. Consider what Jesus said on another occasion. He said, "Whoever would be great among you must become the servant of all." Such greatness is clearly not found in arrogance or in control, but rather in humble submission. It is found in service to God and neighbor!

In other words, we are not the ones who are waited upon. We are the ones who wait! Christmas comes alright, but not because we made it come. It doesn't happen because of our efforts. We can only wait for it to happen, and in the miracle of God's timing, it does! In Jesus Christ, the joy

of God comes down at Christmas but not because we have summoned it! We can only wait! And as hard as that is to do sometimes, that is exactly what we are called to do, to wait! And sometimes waiting is difficult!

Consider what church tradition has taught us regarding James, the brother of Jesus, the one who wrote the book of James. His audience would have most certainly felt the burdens of periodic church persecution; nevertheless, James urges them to be patient and wait; to be patient and wait until the coming of the Lord. And that all sounds good and well except for one glaring detail. You see, the Lord did not return according to their calendar of events. And what does that teach us about waiting? Well, it teaches us to trust in God. To trust that somehow, some way, God, who has been faithful to us in the past, will be faithful to us in the future even when we can't see it. Seldom does impatience serve us very well. If anything, impatience makes waiting that much more difficult. James understood that which is why he said in his fifth chapter that those who wait are blessed.

Our Old Testament Lesson this morning from Isaiah chapter 40, it is a Scripture rooted in another time of waiting in Israel's history. The Southern Kingdom of Judah, which would eventually fall at the hand of God through King Nebuchadnezzar, it would find itself in exile. This Isaiah warned about and so there they are, after the sacking of the temple in 586 BC, a time of great crisis when the best and brightest of Israel's sons and daughters had been taken as slaves to Babylon. They lost their temple, their homes, their freedom, and yet in the midst of that crisis Isaiah's words remind them of the truth about God: "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Of the many lessons that are to be gleaned from that passage, not the least of which is the one which reminds us that we must wait even when it seems hopeless. During these final hours of Advent, may we consider again not our time, but God's time. That in the fullness of time came God's son, our Savior, the one who was born into this world so that you and I might be born from above! Friends, we need not rush to the manger because there are some things that God would have us to learn that will simply come by no other means apart from waiting.

So let us use our times of waiting, whatever they may be, let us use them as an opportunity to trust God, and to learn through our waiting that life is not centered around us, but around the will and intention of God. As we wait for Christmas, we wait upon the Lord, and, for having done so we renew our strength.

Let us pray, Gracious and Loving God, when throughout our life we find ourselves having to wait, may such moments be filled with unexpected grace and peace and healing and wholeness. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.