

Waiting with the Psalmist
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Psalm 27
February 21, 2016

Our psalmist is an historian. His (or her!) story is our history. Like all of humanity, the psalmist has known God's presence in times of wellbeing, and perceived God's absence in times of peril.

And like all of humanity, the psalmist has waited on God. God is coming, y'all, but when? Are we there yet?

Sometimes, God feels so near. In this nearness, we wait with confidence. In this nearness, the psalmist proclaims:

The Lord is my light and my salvation,
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life,
Of whom shall I be afraid?

Enemies will assail me, armies will rise up against me. No matter! I will be confident! For God will protect me, conceal me, even set me high upon a rock. God's got this, y'all! We won't wait long!

The psalmist experiences a good God. This God protects us, lifts us up, makes us feel safe, envelops us in a warm, fluffy blanket.

This is the God of the garden, the one who gave humanity its every provision. This is the God of Miriam and Moses, the one they sang to when Pharaoh's army was destroyed. This is the God who protected David with Samuel's counsel and Johnathan's friendship. This is the God who wiped away weeping Jeremiah's tears. This is the God who told Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, "Boys, don't worry, it's cool in the furnace!" This is the God that said to Daniel, "Friend, fear not, these lions have no bite!" This is the God who helped widowed strangers like Ruth and Naomi find a home. And this is the God who helps you and me. Soon! The wait won't be that long.

The psalmist likes this God, and so do we! When God stills our waters, and greens our pastures and brightens our dark valleys, when God sets forth banquets in our midst, we are eager to sing and make melody to the Lord. We are eager to wait for God, because we know the wait won't be long.

The psalmist, and us as well, say to God: "If you're coming to the party, we'll check yes for our RSVP. Life is so good when God feels so near."

And so we wait with confidence. God's coming. You'll see!!!

But sometimes, sometimes, God doesn't feel very near. And in our perceived isolation, we wait with apprehension and doubt. Is this an exercise in futility? Into an echoing distance, the Psalmist cries:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
Be gracious to me and answer me!

I'm calling on you, God. This is not a game of Marco Polo or Hide and Seek. Make yourself known! I don't have anybody left, so do not abandon me, but come and be by my side, right here, right now. Please! Are you coming, God?

In times of great peril, the psalmist does not sense God's closeness, nor does the psalmist have the confidence displayed in the first few stanzas. God seems distant. And the psalmist is frustrated and impatient. "I know you have acted in the past. So act now!"

With Job, the psalmist shakes a fist at God's perceived distance. With those enslaved in Egypt, the psalmist says, "We are covenant people. We know you can hear us. Help!" With those who sit by the Rivers of Babylon, the psalmist wonders, "Where has God gone? And how are we to sing and make melody to the Lord when the music won't play anymore?" Like those hungry and cold and tired in the wilderness of Israel, the psalmist is anxious, wondering, "What's next, God? We're tired of manna, of subsistence!" The psalmist, just like every human being, feels vulnerable. And in this vulnerability, God doesn't feel so close.

This isn't the God we have confidence in, it's not the God that makes us feel warm and fuzzy. In dark valleys, we're not convinced that the sun will peak over the ridge. And if there is to be a banquet, we fear our date will never arrive to take us to the party.

When God feels so far away, life doesn't feel so good.

And so we wait, but not with confidence. We wait with angst. "Is God really coming? Really? I'll believe it when I see it."

So here we are, twelve verses into our psalm. And at this point, here's what we know: Like all people, the Psalmist waits on God to act. Some days it's easy, and some days it's not.

And here's another thing we know. No matter who we are, no matter where we are, and no matter when we are, we cannot control how or when or even if, God will act. We know as much in God's name, Yahweh – *I am who I will be*.

Part of relationship with God involves waiting.

The Israelites waited forty years in the wilderness for a new home. Judaea waited for a Messiah for more than 500 years. Jesus waited forty days in the wilderness to discern God's call. And throughout his ministry, he reminded others that "only the Father knows the appointed hour." The disciples waited for courage. The Apostle Paul waited for a second coming. And for two thousand years, so have many Christians.

And in this season of Lent we wait. We wait for light to emerge from darkness. We wait for spring to emerge from winter. We wait for a dark Saturday to burst into Sunday. We wait.

But twelve verses into this psalm, the psalmist has yet to make a compelling case for how we should wait. Do we wait with trust and confidence? Or should we wait with apprehension? Should we litter our conversations with maybes and possibly's?

Verse thirteen provides our answer. The Psalmist has seen enough to know that God will act, and that God's goodness will be apparent:

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

The psalmist has seen enough to know that God's presence is not some far-off possibility, not some pipe dream, not a lottery ticket. God lives. God loves. God will act. Here. Among the living. It's not an if, but a when. The psalmist, and you, and me, we're part of God's ongoing story. We're part of a covenant people. We're connected to a maker who does not forget us and who does not abandon us.

And so the psalmist concludes:

Wait for the Lord;
Be strong, and let your heart take courage;
Wait for the Lord!

And so, friends, we're called to wait with confidence on God. But, how does one wait with confidence?

I have an idea.

Nearly fifty years ago, Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney encouraged Christians to journey to the communion table not as guests, but as waiters. Marney noted the irony of the verb waiting in this context. In an ideal world, a guest makes a request, and then waits patiently for the "waiter" to bring out the meal. All too often, dinner guests are impatient. They do not wait for their meal. They are anxious, sometimes cranky, and they usually doubt the waiter's ability to deliver the meal as promised. A waiter has to become a servant. He or she must be attentive to water glass, napkin, bread basket, and a bevy of other requests.

At Sardis, on special occasions we come to a communion table to meet Christ and to wait for his return. And every day, we come to a more common table, our community of believers. At this table, we wait, together, to see the goodness of God in the land of the living. Our wait straddles the pendulum of trust and doubt. For some of us that goodness is apparent. For others, it seems fleeting and distant.

But what would happen if we stopped coming to God's table as dinner guests and started coming as servants? What would happen, if while we waited together for God's redemption we chose to serve one another?

I believe that we would see God's goodness in the land of the living.

When our children ask, we can tell them the story of how God acts in our lives: friends who support us in ways can't support ourselves. Friends who don't try to provide answers and explanations for pain brought on by grief or divorce or addiction, but instead offer listening ears. Friends who pray for us when the fatigue of illness or depression or aging prevents us from having the strength and confidence to do so ourselves; friends who fill our water glasses of simple needs: caring acts like little notes, or

home-cooked meals, or words of encouragement at precisely-timed moments. Friends who challenge us to not only identify the needs of our neighbors, but to empathize with those needs, and meet those needs: food, shelter, community, advocacy, decency, love!

God's goodness is revealed and experienced in communities of mutual service.

And should we choose to be a community of servants, in both good days and bad, we too can proclaim with the psalmist's sense of confidence: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

May it always be so!