

Setting the Watch – Brian Hartley

Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

I hate waiting. And, if you don't believe me, just ask my family. Whether it's waiting in traffic because of some ill-timed accident or waiting in line in the grocery because the person at the front has chosen to argue over the price of each and every item in her cart, somehow my Puritan forebears sense of redeeming the time causes me to nervously fidget and wonder how I might have spent these moments in a more productive manner. As the cashier lifts the microphone to say, "Price check on register two," I squirm anxiously trying to carefully balance the half-dozen items I have collected, one hand going entirely numb from the ice cream carton while the other strains under the weight of the 20-pound bag of potatoes I thought I was man enough to tote to the front. All the while some poor matronly pensioner stands at the front of the line quibbling over a few cents worth.

Waiting like this always brings back one of the most painful memories of my adolescence that took place on a cool, crisp November morning in eastern Oklahoma when I underwent one of the rites of passage for any southern boy. I was fifteen and hated the thought of deer hunting, but we lived in a town where the "real" men drove pick-up trucks, had a gun rack, a case of beer, a can of tobacco, and a woman as trophies to prove that they were something—and I struck out on every single count. So, my father determined that the best way to restore confidence in his misfit son was to take me into the woods to slaughter an animal.

Now, I have to tell you that this experience was one of the most miserable, most trying, in all my teenage years. We got up at some god-awful hour like 3:30 a.m. and headed for the woods. Of course, it was drizzling and cold, and not even the cups of hot cocoa seemed to take the chill out of your body. And all of this, for what? To sit quietly behind a tree in the wet leaves and stare out into the darkness looking for some naïve, disoriented, love-sick buck to come wandering along so that I could raise this instrument of death and get my shoulder kicked into kingdom come. As traumatic as adolescence was, this was enough to make me think that I never wanted to attain manhood. It was more than clear to me that, had I been a Neolithic man participating in the everyday ancient task of sheer survival, I would not have lived to see my sixteenth birthday and would probably have been confined by puberty beneath some primitive bog as detritus for some museum.

But we all know that not all waiting is this painful, however. There are other kinds of waiting, like the months that stretch between when you first realize you're going to be a parent and the appearance of that little wrinkled infant who renders in rather concrete ways new meaning to the phrase, "absolute dictatorship." There are wonderful moments as you plan for this special event, learn how to put a crib together, take those classes on primitive breathing techniques, and discover the highs and lows of the feminine psyche. You pull out the books and marvel at how this single cell develops into a living, breathing, human being, and you watch in wonder at how your wife's belly grows into the size of a watermelon as this nascent child

starts banging around inside, writing her name on the walls and demonstrating that her will can outlast yours.

So what is the difference between these varieties of waiting? Why is it that some times can be so difficult and painful while others are so joyous and wondrous? Perhaps much of what differentiates these times is the sheer level of anticipation. There is an old cliché around that suggests that half the fun in achieving anything is getting there. Think of standing in line at Dairy Queen on a hot summer's day waiting, with great anticipation, for the cold sweet taste of ice cream. Your tongue swells as sweat pours from your body greedily anticipating the smoothness of a chocolate cone. Or think of the first snow falling as a child as you watched with enormous anticipation at the prospects of digging the sled out of the garage and pummeling your brother with snowballs. You knew that the ignominy of past wrongs would soon be set to rights.

But in the important issues in life, we don't want to mess around with all this anticipation stuff. Our attitude is similar to that of the prophet in today's text who cries out, "Why don't you tear the sky open and come down? . . . Come and reveal your power to your enemies, and make the nations tremble at your presence! (64:1-2, TEV). Throughout this passage, he suggests that the people feel abandoned, abused, cut off from a supposedly loving God. As Roy Howard suggests in a recent article (October, 2008, Interpretation 62), "This is the urgent signal that something dreadfully important is at stake for both God and people. A people under assault and losing their bearings in a world gone awry are questioning the divine covenant. That is putting it too obliquely; what is being questioned directly is God's commitment and, more pointedly, God's responsibility for the whole mess," (419). This is a heart-breaking lament from an apparently depressingly-pessimistic prophet. Both prophet and people experience something of a crisis as they try to make sense of the gap between God's lavish promises and the harsh reality in which they find themselves—one filled with pain and inequity.

Yet, even here, there is a kind of "earthy" anticipation. Not as though he made a spiritual jet flight across several time zones, arriving at the same hour as he took off—the kind of thing you feel when you're on a date with that special girl and you can't wait to kiss her good night. No, this is a more temperate mood, plodding steadily through the dreary desert below, sorely conscious that the end is not yet in sight, yet still trustful that one day such a time will indeed come. This is a realistic type of anticipation, not so keenly aware of God's presence as of God's absence. There is a particular strength and courage in this slower, more tortoise-like anticipation.

The prophet here shares in the questioning, pessimism, and pain of his people. It has been so long since he has experienced God's working that his is an anguished cry of uneasy impatience resulting from hope long delayed. He is living in the crucible of the not-yet, struggling to tread water and keep his eyes focused on the hope before him. It is hard at such times to remain patient. We know that relief is supposedly coming, but as time goes on our hopes begin to fade and our anticipation can even begin to change from anxiety to animosity. What are we to do in such times? Our gospel passage offers to us some hints.

In the Ozark hills from whence my family originated, there exists to this day the ancient art of "whittlin'." Stop in any little community in northern Arkansas or southern Missouri on a hot summer's day and there in front of the post office sitting on the same park benches you can find

anywhere in the U.S. will be a collection of seniors, the unemployed, and the town busybodies, one or more of which may well have a small pocketknife and a piece of wood in his hands. Hour by hour, day by day, little strips of wood are peeled back on the carving, sometimes in an almost meaningless manner. All of this energy may not result in anything constructive at all, but may only provide a pile of wood shavings a few inches thick at the end of the day. Someone else seated nearby may be engaged in that other ancient art known as “twiddling the thumbs,” an uncomplicated exercise of twirling your thumbs around and around for countless minutes. Nobody is better at killing time than hill-folk. A piece of wood, a coffee-can spittoon, and a Mason jar of homebrew goes a long way towards whiling the day away, but usually result in very little in the way of productivity.

Perhaps this is the picture we get of what it means to wait—to stand on the corner and twiddle our thumbs or fidget nervously, while whittling meaninglessly on a stick. But that is not the picture that the evangelist provides for us today. Four times in these short verses we hear the command to keep awake, to be on the watch. The vigilance set forth here is almost the opposite of the sleepy-like, lazy-eyed meaningless existence we oftentimes associate with waiting. Anticipation in this context means intentionally staying awake—being alert and watchful to all that is happening around one-self. There is no logic by which the tension of the moment can be reduced; to have faith means simply to stay faithful at each moment. This is not just a mood to be experienced at a certain time of the year, but a symbol of the entire Christian lifestyle.

The gospel writer suggests that we are like men and women who know that the master is coming, but we don't know exactly when. We live, as William Barclay suggests, in the shadow of eternity. That doesn't mean that we become hysterical and run around like chickens with their heads cut off. It means that day by day our work must be completed, we must set ourselves to the task at hand. In essence then, to watch means to get on with the work given us. This gives the lie to the wild-eyed apocalyptic prophets who flee to the hills to store up for the holocaust ahead. Our calling is to constancy amidst the rise and fall of the worst and best our times may offer.

Both of these texts have a word for us this day. Isaiah reminds us that there is room for the plodding theology of “slow, but steady wins the race.” Sometimes we come to the holiday season with this same kind of resignation. It's not that we've lost all hope; it's just that the past and present have made us a bit pessimistic. Lord knows, the current state of the economy doesn't help! And, word this week that shoppers on Friday were willing to trample a man to death in search of a bargain at Walmart surely must make us wonder about the moral state of a culture in which people are literally willing to walk over the body of a dying man in pursuit of material goods. Before so much bad news, it is easy to throw our hands up in resignation. We feel helpless to help all of the new poor showing up at the food bank. We watch helplessly as some of our friends lose jobs and marriages. Our own children perhaps need braces and we're not sure we have the money. We know we're supposed to be people of rock-like faith, but somehow in the midst of it all we feel alone, cut-off and alienated from all the sugar-coated Christmas carols vendors pump out in desperation this season throughout the mall. We're thinking about the helplessness and brokenness we see all around us and in our darkest moments wondering if God is asleep, or worse yet, if He doesn't even exist.

We've been taught to think that God exists in all the dramatic, powerful, and extraordinary things—the glorious sunsets, the majestic mountains, the pounding surfs of our emotional and spiritual lives. And so, we're tempted to sit and wait for God to "do his thing." And yet, all around us are opportunities to "be vigilant." "God is in the music, in laughter and in sorrow, too. And the gray times," says Frances Dominica, "when monotony stretches out ahead, these can be the times of steady, solid growth in God." Our world seems to be careening off into the cosmos like a rocket ship hurtling to earth and here we are slowly traveling along, like Joseph and Mary before, holding in our arms the weakness and poverty of the child, Jesus.

That's what it means to anticipate. It means to search for God in God's absence and to turn our expectation into present activity. Our work is not simply a diversion, a twiddling of the thumbs, something to help us kill time. Our master has given us important tasks to do. Our true hope is not to be found in some kind of triumphalist razzle-dazzle, or supernatural splitting of the skies, but in the daily work and witness that each of us is called to carry on for the Kingdom's sake. That doesn't mean that all the air is taken out of our anticipatory balloon. We, like the rest of creation, join in groaning for his appearance. As Gail O'Day has recently said, "Each year these hopes for the fullness of God's promises, the fruitfulness of God's justice, are born again, as the worshiping community looks toward the advent of the One who redefines past, present, and future," ("Back to the Future," Interpretation 62, 370). But we don't camp out on a mountain or sit around on our haunches pointing towards the sky. For we don't know when or how this final consummation, these unfulfilled promises, will come to fruition.

I got awfully tired that morning sitting in the cold and the rain waiting for that phantom deer. My father finally sent me back to the car while he continued to wait. I dozed off for some time and only awoke as my dad crawled back inside the automobile to try and warm himself. Depressed and disappointed, he asked if I was ready to go home. But, by that time, I was beginning to catch my second wind and I suggested, now that it was light, that we go back for one last stretch of a half-hour or so. Somewhat grudgingly, he consented. But, he told me, "Son, deer don't usually show up this late in the morning, especially with all the noise we've been making."

So, with the red-streaked sky as background, we sat there in the chill morning air, sipping from our thermos the last few swallows of cocoa, huddled together for warmth. And, lo and behold, if not a few minutes later this majestic seven-point buck didn't come down to the water to drink, not fifty yards from us. My dad started to shake with excitement and pushed the gun towards me, but if I hadn't really known it before, I learned in that moment that, unlike the main character in one of my favorite John Updike stories, "Pigeon Feathers," I just didn't have the heart or the stomach to pull the trigger. I was destined to being a pacifist for the rest of my life. But my father had no such qualms as he raised the gun to try and steady his shot. The thunderous report reverberated off the hills around us and the deer fell down dead in his tracks—shot clean through the thorax. My father, a true Neanderthal, let out a war whoop, some primitive vestige of our long-ago ancestor's participation in the hunt, and went careening off down the hill. His first kill; and I had been there to witness it.

It had come suddenly, much later than expected, and without warning—certainly not in the manner my father had thought it would. We had sat there and suffered through the early

morning hours and not a thing had happened—and now this. His patience had prevailed and all the long hours of waiting had borne the fruit of the kill. A funny thing, anticipation: you get it all worked out in your mind, exactly how it's supposed to be, and then, it somehow always turns out differently. But then, our patience is usually rewarded in the end. It's hard sitting out in the cold and the rain, hoping against hope that it's not in vain. And yet, our Lord tells us that it's not in vain. So my word to you this day as we gather to watch and to wait is to take heart—he's coming. Watch, and be ready. For I have a strong feeling that his coming will be somehow different than we expected. Let us remember that the God who calls us is faithful and true. In the meantime, let us wait and work in anticipation of his appearance.