

Waiting for the Righteous King – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; I Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

When our daughter, Mathea, went to bed last Sunday night, she asked me if she could just sleep until Wednesday. “Why?” I asked. “Why would you want to sleep through three days of school, piano practices, taking care of YOUR DOG Preston, and house cleaning?” She responded, “Max and Abby and Audra are coming on Wednesday, and if I can just sleep until they get here, the time will go faster.” She couldn’t imagine waiting three more days for her friends to arrive for Thanksgiving. She knew they were coming, but she didn’t want to wait.

That’s the way it is for most of us as we anticipate something good we know is going to happen. It’s hard to wait. As a child, it’s the struggle to stay in bed past 5:00 a.m. on Christmas morning. For those of us on an academic calendar, it’s the end of every semester. Do you know any students who have ever been sad to turn in a final paper? Have any professors ever regretted submitting their final grades? For the rest of you, perhaps it’s hard for you to wait for a needed vacation or a long weekend. For space station astronaut and engineer Nicole Stott, Friday was the day she had been anticipating for three months—she returned to earth on board the Space Shuttle Atlantis after spending 91 days in orbit.

Randy pointed out to me in yesterday’s Post-Dispatch that there are some people who don’t seem to mind waiting quite as much as the rest of us. On Friday morning “near the front of the line at the Bass Pro Shops” in St. Charles, Missouri, Nathan Wright, Ronnie Ocello, Justin Roth, Alex Gunkel, and Austin Olendorff, all of St. Charles, Missouri, “waited for the doors to open at 6:00 a.m. so they could shop for sweatshirts, a BB gun, and camouflage fleece jackets” (really important stuff). They had been in line since about 9 p.m. Thursday” evening waiting for their chance to buy Black Friday specials.

Today we begin Advent, the season of waiting in our church calendar. We made it through the long Season after Pentecost, Ordinary time, and we’re beginning a new year as we both remember Jesus’ birth at Christmas and anticipate Christ coming again. Our Scripture passages today tell us a lot about waiting—who we’re waiting for, why we wait, and how we should wait.

In our short Jeremiah passage for today, we hear that “the days are surely coming” when God’s promise to Israel and Judah will be fulfilled. God will send them—Israel and Judah—a “righteous Branch.” This good king is who they are waiting for. For people who have endured some very bad kings and have not always been treated fairly by those kings, the promise of a righteous leader who will “save” them and make it possible for them to “live in safety” must bring them hope. He is worth the wait. According to this passage, this king will be both legitimate and righteous—he will right wrongs; he will restore order. This is why they are waiting—their world

needs a leader who will restore justice. The words of this passage are full of certainty—"I will fulfill," "I will cause," "he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." We do not doubt that God will keep this promise. But when that fulfillment will come is not certain at all. Each verse refers to some unknown time in the future when this "righteous Branch" will arrive: "In those days," "at that time." When is that exactly? How long will Judah and Israel have to wait for their Lord of righteousness? They don't know when. But they should know that it will be. So they are waiting for God to send a righteous leader who will redeem their unrighteous world.

The apocalyptic passage we read from Luke for today continues this theme of waiting. It's difficult to imagine a more frightening place than the world that Luke describes here in chapter 21. It sounds a little like Gotham City without Batman. Such weird things will be happening to the sun, moon, stars, and sea that people will "faint from fear and foreboding." It seems as if Luke is telling his readers to despair. Yet with verse 27 Luke's advice goes another direction. He says that these "signs" should bring hope because they precede the "Son of Man" coming "with power and great glory." This is who they are waiting for: Christ when he returns to earth. As in the Jeremiah passage, Luke speaks with a tone of certainty about the coming of the One they await. His reasons for waiting for Christ's return also parallel those in the Jeremiah passage. The readers of Luke's gospel can be certain that the "Son of Man," Jesus, will come as a righteous king to restore justice to the earth. This is why they are waiting—because "their redemption is drawing near." Yet once again the certainty of the Lord's coming is coupled with the uncertainty of when that promise will be fulfilled. Luke doesn't identify when "that day" will be, only that it is "near." He also cautions that they need to be watchful so they are ready for it.

Like the people of Israel and Judah and the first century Christians Luke addressed, we must remember who we are waiting for and why we are waiting for Him. But neither today's Jeremiah passage nor our Luke reading suggests that we should wait passively. Luke cautions the readers of his gospel to wait patiently and expectantly for the "Son of Man" so that they don't miss him. Both patience and expectation involve action. If I sit and wait passively, I fall asleep. I don't notice that the fig tree is sprouting leaves and that summer is near. I miss the one for whom I am waiting. Luke also advises them to continue praying and not to allow themselves to be consumed with things that will distract them from their wait. This is how they should wait. They should keep doing God's work, but they should not lose sight of that for which they wait.

Many Christians who have focused on apocalyptic passages like this section of Luke's gospel often quite naturally develop other-worldly assumptions about Jesus' spectacular return from the "shaken" heavens. But if we remember who we are waiting for—the righteous and just king that all today's readings point to—then we will recognize our task is not simply pie-in-the-sky other-worldliness, but the task of working for those things that the King values—righteousness and justice in the kingdom of God that is near. If our eager anticipation helps us do the will of the King, then the day of His return will not catch us by surprise.

In today's psalm the Psalmist also waits for the Lord. He waits for the Lord "all day long," and he asks that "those who wait" not "be put to shame." He waits because those who wait will be

rewarded with “steadfast love and faithfulness.” This is the “who” and “why” of his waiting. As in Jeremiah and Luke, there is certainty that the God he waits for will be faithful. But we can learn more here about how we should wait. The Psalmist’s waiting is not passive either. He asks the Lord to continue to show him truth and teach him about righteousness. He continues to learn. He must not just be alert and faithful in his waiting, but he must be faithful in his learning and doing as well.

In our final scripture passage for today, we see Paul waiting. As in our other passages, Paul waits for Christ’s imminent return, but he also waits for the opportunity to return to his friends in Thessalonica. Earlier in this third chapter of I Thessalonians, we learn that Timothy has recently returned from visiting the Thessalonians with a good report of their perseverance in the faith. But Paul longs to be with his friends himself in order to encourage them further. He understands the insidious daily pressures against faithfulness, and he wants to encourage them first-hand as they wait for the “coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” This is the “why” of his and their waiting. Since he doesn’t know when he will be with them in person, he takes this epistolary opportunity to encourage them to righteousness while they wait. Paul prays that they will “increase and abound in love for one another and for all” and that their hearts will be holy and “blameless.” According to Paul, they cannot wait passively. They must continue loving and living righteously.

We’re not very good at waiting these days. We use credit cards and home equity loans to purchase what we want rather than saving the money required for our purchases beforehand. We jump in our cars to travel five blocks rather than taking ten minutes to walk that distance. We order an appetizer while we wait for our meal in a restaurant to squelch our hunger pangs. We’re not satisfied with our 100 megabyte per second internet connection. Most of us don’t live with the same urgency of Christ’s imminent return as the early Christians. We hear the urgency in Luke’s and Paul’s voices, but we know that Christians have been waiting more than 2,000 years for Christ to return. In the frenetic pace of our days, it is easy to forget that we are waiting, and that God is doing righteous work through us while we wait. Today as we begin this season of Advent, let’s commit ourselves to the wait. Let’s remember the certainty of who we’re waiting for, why we’re waiting, and how we are called to wait.