

The Value of Waiting and Being Bored

Psalm 27 & Acts 1:1-14

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time/23rd September 2007

There's one word in this text that struck me this week. I was getting ready for the Thursday morning Bible study of *Acts*, which started this week, and was drawn to this one word in the beginning of the text. The author, Luke, is writing to Theophilus, whose name means literally, "lover of God" or "God lover"; he's recounting the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The forty days post resurrection are about to come to an end, Jesus is about to ascend to heaven. But before Jesus leaves he gathers them together in Jerusalem and charges them not to leave the city, but "to wait for the promise of the Father," that in time they will be baptized by the Holy Spirit," in time the Holy Spirit will literally wash over them. Until that time they are to "wait." That's the word that struck me. "*Wait.*"

If there's a prophetic, counter-cultural word for our age, it's this word. This impatient age of ours that wants everything today, or yesterday. This age that glories in immediate gratification. That's worship speed. We can't even tolerate slow internet service. We don't like to wait in lines. We are people who don't like to wait. We want it now, in the moment, don't delay the future. And we'll even pay extra for the convenience of not waiting, for not wasting time, for having it – whatever it is – now. This attitude even spills over into our prayer life and walk with the Lord. We pray and expect God to deliver within twenty-hours. We don't understand why we are forced to wait. We might become frustrated or think we're not praying correctly because the universe is not conforming to our wills, that the universe is not cooperating with us on our terms, according to our plans, according to our schedules.

The world of the Bible is counter-cultural to ours, it contains a worldview that is, whether we like it or not, full of waiting – not days, but forty days; not a year, but forty years, decades, even centuries. The Bible teaches us that to be mixed up with Yahweh inevitably means we, too, will have to wait. And with Yahweh, waiting always serves a purpose.

Telling his disciples to wait for further directions before leaving Jerusalem is another way of saying to them, "You're not in charge here, I am. I call the shots." We might like to sing with Sinatra, "I Did it My Way," but our way is not Yahweh's way. Hearing Jesus say to us, "Wait," is both disturbing and comforting. Disturbing, because it assaults our belief that we are in charge of our lives – and we're not; or the belief that

we belong to ourselves – and we don't. To be baptized at this font or any other font chiefly means we don't belong to ourselves, *we belong to the Lord*. At some level this is always disturbing to the ego, but it's also the source of great comfort because we realize that our lives are lived within the tents of the Lord, that we are *hidden* in God's life. We come to affirm, as Presbyterians have always affirmed, *God's sovereignty* over our lives. We are being shaped and directed by the will and hope of God. We are part of the grand drama of God's salvation story.

So that in the waiting, sitting still in one place, stopping our mad obsession with time and speed and rushing about, we can be still and know that *God* is God. Waiting allows us to put on the brakes so we can remember who we are and whose we are. In our experience of waiting, between now and not yet, between this time and the time to come that we are hoping for, between one thing and the next, we begin to crack open a space in-between for our lives. Waiting opens up, as it were, a space in time, of various durations, and in that space in-between times we are given breathing space or, in German, *Lebensraum*, "living room," living space, and *in* the vast, broad space (cf. Job 36:16) of waiting is the space and the time that prepares us to hear, to listen for God's voice, for direction, to discover what comes next. Now, some might have an inability to tolerate empty space, but that, ironically, as the British psychoanalyst, W. R. Bion (1897-1979) suggests, "limits the amount of space available."¹ Some might say all that time of waiting with no direction, no goal, and no action is empty space, a waste of time – but I'm not so sure.

I think that space in-between, that waiting space and time, where nothing seems to be happening can actually be one of the most fruitful, creative times in our lives. Why? Because in the waiting, if we have patience and maybe courage to embrace the waiting, we can listen to our hearts, be attentive to the soul, and really be open to God's directive and presence. Learning to wait for the Promised Land the Israelites were forged into a people and in the process they discovered their identity in God and learned to trust God to be faithful. Psalm 27 is just one of many texts throughout scripture that encourage us to "wait for the Yahweh, the LORD." In Hebrew, the word for "waiting" and "hoping" is the same, *qavah*. They knew from their experience with Yahweh the power of hopeful waiting. To wait for Yahweh is to hope and in the waiting we learn to hope in Yahweh. But this is tough if waiting makes us uncomfortable, or it seems – *boring*.

¹ "Inability to tolerate empty space limits the amount of space available." From his work, *Cogitations*, cited in Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essay on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 71.

I've wanted to preach about boredom for some time; however it's really a theme searching after a text. I'm not sure what text I would use as a guide. There are some who believe the entire Bible is boring. Boredom is a kind of waiting, waiting for something to grab our attention, to interest us. Just as we might be anxious about the empty, unproductive time of waiting, there's also some anxiety around being bored, as if it's a mood to be avoided at all costs. Some will do anything to avoid boredom.

Sometimes, I know, parents are concerned about whether their children will be bored with church school or worship. Jim Rayburn, Presbyterian minister and founder of the Young Life movement in the 1940s, once said, "It's a sin to bore a kid with the Gospel." Contemporary theologian, Joyce Ann Mercer addresses what she calls the "Boredom Problem," in her groundbreaking book on the theology of childhood (which I referred to several weeks ago on Kick-Off Sunday). Adult anxiety about childhood boredom, she writes, is "the clearest addition to parental burdens after 1945... Quite simply, boredom increasingly mutated, after the late 1940s from being an attribute of personality that needed attention to being an inflicted state that demanded correction by others (185)." Why this shift of emphasis? Post-War America has been and is shaped by a *consumer culture*. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that "boredom is one complaint the consumer world has no room for, and the consumer culture set out to eradicate it. A happy life, as defined by consumer culture, is life insured against boredom, life in which constantly 'something happens,' something new, exciting, and exciting because new." Mercer sees "the need to keep children entertained through buying commodities became intertwined with the redefinition of parenting as providing fun to children, both to the benefit of the market." The church could hardly be immune to these cultural shifts. She's not alone in warning that "children suffer in a variety of ways from the constant stimulation of desire and longing," and the belief that "children must be in a constant state of arousal and engagement, every moment packed with fun." This might be the source of the question, "If children are bored with church school or worship then [will] they grow to dislike the church"??² Perhaps we begin to see how our attitude toward boredom might actually be *socially constructed*, certainly not a sin.

There's actually a therapeutic, and I believe, theological value in being bored. A bored child is waiting. Instead of seeing boredom as something to be overcome, requiring distraction, boredom, like waiting, can be a creative, fruitful time of self-discovery. Years ago I came across a book with the curious title: *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, written by Adam Phillips.

² See Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Children*. Foreword by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 91-94, 185, 215-216.

Phillips is the principal child psychotherapist at the Wolverton Gardens Child and Family Consultation Centre in London. In this fascinating, thoughtful book he explains how “the capacity to be bored can be a developmental achievement for the child.” He writes that boredom is actually “an experience of anticipation.” Because bored is a precarious process, when a child is “preoccupied by his lack of preoccupation,” in which a child is both waiting and looking for something, “in which,” he explains, “*hope is being secretly negotiated.*” Phillips believes that in boredom, if managed carefully, a child is “not exactly waiting for someone else, he is, as it were waiting for himself.”

Sometimes a child is more comfortable with boredom than we might be, and this is significant. “Is it not, indeed revealing,” he asks, “what the child’s boredom evokes in the adults? ...How often, in fact, the child’s boredom is met by the most perplexing form of disapproval, the adult’s wish to distract him – as though the adults have decided that the child’s life must be, or be seen to be, endlessly interesting.” Then he offers this vital insight, “*It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested, rather than take time to find what interests him.* Boredom is integral to the process of taking one’s time. While the child’s boredom is often recognized as an incapacity, it is usually denied as an opportunity.”

A child’s boredom needs to be held, non-anxiously by the adult, indeed, we need to provide spaces, time for a child to be bored (without this time triggering anxiety in us) so that a child discovers what interest him/her. In that time of boredom, of searching, of waiting, something happens in a child. Phillips writes, “The bored child, a sprawl of absent possibilities, is looking for something to hold his attention.”³ That *object*, the thing that will grab his attention and interest him is ever illusive, but only the child can find it, it can’t be given to him. Adults can create the space for the discovery to happen.

I can’t help but think that we need these places too: space for something to hold our attention. We, too, need times when we are waiting and bored. The things we are searching for are equally illusive. And what is more illusive than God? Isn’t this similar to the way God creates *waiting spaces* in which we discover who we are and discover who God is? We, too, need that waiting space to discover Someone who will hold our attention.

In the 3rd century, Christians escaped Roman persecution by retreating to the deserts of Egypt. Out in the middle of nowhere, with plenty of time on their hands, waiting for something to change, the desert fathers and mothers struggled with

³ All quotations from Phillips are from his chapter, “On Being Bored,” pp. 68-78.

boredom. A leader of the community once told a hermit, “Stay in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.” We can face boredom without terror. We can press through the boredom to listen for God.⁴ And so we wait. And with Yahweh, waiting always serves a purpose.

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⁴ Cited in Jason Byassee, “Why Religious Journalism is ‘Boring,’” *Theology Today* (2007:62, 1), 282. The importance of waiting and pushing through boredom is illustrated by Eric Sanderson of the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York City who remembers when he was a Boy Scout, “a counselor told him to sit next to the Stanislaus River [California] for three hours without moving. ‘I thought I was done after fifteen minutes,’ he said. ‘After thirty minutes, I was totally bored. And then things got interesting. I began to notice things.’” Nick Paumgarten, “The Mannahatta Project,” *The New Yorker* (October, 2007), 47. See also the chapter on “Stalking,” in Annie Dillard’s, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).