

A season of waiting and listening. - Cedric Martin

This past week I was lucky enough to go and see Jesus Christ Superstar at Mirvish. We were celebrating my father's 60th birthday. In case you didn't know I'm a big theatre nerd. I love going to see plays, I love reading plays, I just love being at and around the theatre. This was my first live play since February of 2020. To paraphrase Jesus in that musical 'I waited for 2 years, feels like 20.'

I had already decided the title of my sermon, 'A season of Waiting and Listening' when I went to see the show. And as I was thinking about my sermon the line "What's the buzz? Tell me what's happening!" stood out to me. Jesus replied "why should you want to know? Don't you mind about the future, Don't you try to think ahead. Save tomorrow for tomorrow, think about today instead."

Waiting can be hard. I'm a very impulse-motivated person. Sometimes this is very helpful and sometimes this is really to my detriment. I think I'm a very good problem solver and can think on my feet quite well. However, I struggle to stick to a routine. My wife Alyse suggested I build a time into my day to go for a break and a bike ride. "Go everyday at 2pm" she suggests. It's an excellent idea, and I wish I could implement it... However, I can't stick to a routine. I never go to bed at the same time, I never wake up at the same time. I don't start work at the same time, or spend the same amount of time working each day. I struggle to do laundry and grocery shopping on a regular schedule. I'd much rather walk into the grocery store, buy whatever inspires me and go home to eat it over the next X number of days depending on how long the impulse purchases last. Fortunately, Alyse helps slow me down, gets us to write a list based on what we actually need, what we're out of, etc.

Throughout this pandemic, I've heard a lot of "I can't wait until I can..." 'Get vaccinated' 'Go see a play', 'have school back in-person', 'travel', 'see my family again', 'be at church in-person', or 'have people over to my house'. Now we're in a new season of waiting... on top of the new normal pandemic waiting. We're in the waiting for Christmas period. My cousin recently said to me "December just flies by". It's true, it absolutely can... But what do we miss by just waiting for the next thing?

I think it's a pretty terrible movie, so I wouldn't recommend spending time watching it, but the movie "Click" with Adam Sandler hits this point on the head. Adam Sandler's character is given a 'universal remote' which controls... the universe. He can pause, fast forward, even change the language so he can understand someone not speaking English. He cannot rewind to change the past, just watches something from his past a second time. Sandler's character becomes hooked on this remote. At first, he just uses it to fast forward through his boring workday... in which the remote puts him on "auto-pilot" and he takes control again after this stage which he can't remember, but he was still getting his work done, it just makes assumptions based on how you normally behave. Eventually, because of his fixation on skipping the boring stuff, he starts skipping ahead days and weeks to the things he is most excited for. At one point he chooses to skip to his next promotion at work, which ends up being an entire year. He regains awareness after that year, and he's excited for this promotion, but everything at home is different. His kids are a year older and he doesn't know how to relate to them, or know their interests. His relationship with his wife is rocky. Life for him isn't any better now that's he got the promotion, in fact, he feels lonely and less valued.

Again, it's not a very good movie, but I use it as an extreme example of the dangers of wanting to speed ahead to the exciting next thing. What's that saying? "Enjoy the journey?" We're in a current moment and day that we can approach however we choose. It's important that we don't skip ahead to Christmas, or New Years to make resolutions, changes, or to live our lives the way we wish. It's important that I don't skip ahead to the closing hymn and benediction, even if I'm hungry for lunch... I want to appreciate this moment.

* I would like to add a slight footnote here to say, things within our control. I've never had to wait on refugee status to get me to a safe place. I've never been in an unsafe home trying to get out and get to shelter. I haven't had to count down the days to my release or parole from prison. I would still say though, everyday that is our own, we have chances to make that day worthwhile.

In addition to the "I can't wait..." statements, this pandemic has brought a lot of "please wait", "stay home and stay safe", "wait until it's safe", "we'll all get through this if we just stay patient".

There are consequences to every action and inaction we make. I spent a lot of time at home since March 2020, consequently, I did not contract the Corona Virus, but also, my mental health suffered. Some Mennonite Churches in our denomination chose not to run virtual youth programs and consequently their youth are no longer active in their church community, even as

in-person events return. We couldn't gather with our youth in-person so we started weekly zoom calls, rather than wait, consequently, we added even more screen time to their very virtual days of online school. Rather than wait until everyone could come back to TUMC in-person we started doing hybrid worship services which have been so great for so many people, but consequently, they require more volunteers and learning new systems, which can be overwhelming for tired volunteers.

Today we read from Luke 3, and I'll ask you to think about two things from it. The waiting John mentions, and the consequences of our inaction. Today's passage can seem like an interesting choice during advent. But what John says at the end helps set up the story of who the people were waiting for. Who we're waiting for. *"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* In case you don't happen to be a grain expert, a winnowing fork, is used to remove the 'Chaff', the sort of shell or casing around the seed. So in quick sum this passage is saying He will take his winnowing fork, pop the seeds out, and keep them in His granary. But the shell, the outer layer, will be burned in a fire. I wonder what that makes you think about? Jesus coming to burn our Chaff away...

I like that John doesn't encourage sitting around and waiting until 'one more powerful than I' comes. He starts sharing truths similar to what Jesus teaches. He gives very concrete, practical, immediate ideas. *"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."* This sentence feels very fitting as we head into winter, and we have this food drive running.

Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." I feel like the housing market in Toronto needs some tips from John. 'Expect and accept no more than what you list the house for.'

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." Sometimes we know the answer before we ask someone a question. If you're a soldier coming to John the Baptist, hoping to be baptized you'd assume... I mean, can you picture a roman centurion

standing by the water asking a man in camel's hair how he should be a better soldier? Amazing! I feel like this verse right here could be the start of discussion for the defund the police conversations we could have at TUMC.

I think one of the best things John does in this passage is call people out saying *“Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham and Sara as our ancestors’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham and Sara. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree; every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* So in summary, don't rely on your Mennonite heritage to assume you're a good Christian or a good Mennonite. Don't assume because of your skin colour, sexuality, gender identity, church membership, leadership status or age that you can hold that over someone, or that it somehow lets you off the hook. John makes it clear you're very much on the hook.

John's words can feel harsh to us modern readers. Calling the crowd, that willingly decided to come to see him, a “brood of vipers”. I seriously thought about starting today by calling you names from the pulpit. “You Brood of Vipers... You empty headed animal food trough wipers. I fart in your general directions. Your mothers were a hamster and your fathers smelt of elderberries.” I wouldn't appreciate being called names. Some speaker I went to see, sheesh. John is making his audience aware of his prophetic speaking though. He places himself on the level of other old testament writers. But by contrast, our reading today from the old testament, from Isaiah, was much kinder and more hopeful.

John's message is ultimately one of repentance. It's not enough to say sorry, and it's not enough to just wait.

So, as we try to pace ourselves through December, let's remember to be aware of what's happening around us. Be present and appreciate what we're living through. And even for those of us who struggle with routine, let's do our best. We can set an alarm or reminder to check in with ourselves each day. To take a break. Let's also remember that waiting does not have to equal inaction. Don't sit on your heritage laurels. We can be active in our waiting. We don't have to wait until prompting to give our second coat, to donate some extra food, or to care for our neighbour.

Let's all find our moment today. Amen.