

## Waiting for God and Loving the Wait

**Scriptures:** Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18; Philippians 4:4-7

Wow – unquenchable fire eh? I love how the last two lines of the Luke passage are “His winnowing fork is in his hand...but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. So, with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Good news? Good news – unquenchable fire is coming! And the passage starts with John saying “You brood of vipers” to the people that came to be baptized. That’ll grab your attention. Can you imagine us using this for baptisms at TUMC? “You’re a viper and the unquenchable fire is at hand. Welcome to TUMC.” Now, what John is doing, in the business world we would call shock advertizing or shockvertizing., where you intentionally stir up strong feelings to get people to pay attention. John clearly had that figured out, although I don’t think it was all just talk. I think he earnestly believed that God was going to break into the world in a new way, even if he didn’t really know how. With his ministry of acting now to repent and live anew while waiting, John was a strong opening act for what is to follow, and for which people are waiting.

Now, with the children's wonderful leadership this morning, we've joyfully heard and sung how great that main act of Jesus' birth was and how it changed the world forever. Of course, we here in 2024 have the benefit of hindsight; we know what the inbreaking of God through Jesus meant.

However, the first listeners to the prophets and to John the Baptizer didn't have that advantage. They only had glimpses through prophecy of what God's most magnanimous act would be. So, let's step back and consider, for a moment, what it means to wait for Jesus' coming, and see it through the eyes of those who were waiting for, and expecting, a great main act in the form of a Messiah. Let's be reminded of what it truly means to wait for God in our lives; let's consider the words of Zephaniah, John the Baptizer, and Mary the Expectant One, and those first hearers of John's words who were waiting for God.

Thus, the title for my sermon today "Waiting for God and Loving the Wait"

Now, the passage from the prophet Zephaniah we heard earlier in the service can be broken down into three sections – it starts with praise in the first section, then names God as the redeemer and vanquisher of enemies in the

second section, but then, interestingly, in the third section, it moves to naming all the things God *will* do.

“God will renew you; God will remove disaster; God will deal with your oppressors; God will save the lame; etc.”

So, first rejoice, then state the redeeming nature of God, then look forward to what God is going to do. This is a similar pattern to passages you will find in other parts of Scripture, like Isaiah, Psalms and the Wisdom literature. The Isaiah passage for today, for example, which we didn't read, also follows a similar pattern. State the joy, name the salvific nature of God, and then look to the future. Isn't this backwards? Should we really be naming joy first, before we even know what is to come?

Yes, of course we can. And we should. The inherent goodness of God and God's creation is worth celebrating. We can be joyful for what God has already done, even while we are waiting and hoping for what is to come. Waiting is not a time to sit around idly, being morose wishing things would be better. We can be joyful in understanding what God has already done and is doing; God is acting and we can live the hope of things to come.

With that, let's consider the context for Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph and John. Roman occupation of Jewish territory meant that "pax romana" was maintained through threats of violence, bribes and extortion, with complicit Roman soldiers and tax collectors. While largely regarded as an absence of war, pax romana would have hardly felt freeing to the Jewish people living under occupation. Even their own leaders often tried to align themselves with the empire so that they could retain power. The rich and powerful maintain their status. They simply seek gain for themselves. This is typical of many people who live without hope or have no sense of the continuation of life after death. We all have met these kinds of people. We see them in the news – some of us work with some of them. They try to squeeze out as much as they can out of this life, almost hedonistically, since they think of death as the end. This leads to all kinds of corruption and greed, just as was found in the time of the Roman occupation in the land where God was intending to break in.

Into this unjust world, God speaks to Zechariah, his wife Elizabeth, Elizabeth's cousin Mary, and her husband to be, Joseph. They are told they will have a special baby that will bring about change. Most of them express some kind of disbelief. Now, it seems to me that Zechariah gets the raw deal here when he's

the only one of the four that suffers from a loss of speech because of his doubt – that just seems dumb to me.

So, according to Luke, after Mary is told of her pregnancy, she visits Elizabeth in Elizabeth's sixth month, and both mothers-to-be rejoice. Elizabeth is thrilled and feels honoured by Mary, "the mother of my Lord" coming to her, and the baby "leaps in her womb" when Mary greets Elizabeth. Mary, for her part sings what we now know as the Magnificat, and heard earlier. Anyone who's been expecting a child knows that the period waiting for the birth can be full of so many emotions – anticipation, anxiety (how can I be a parent, will we be ready, what if?, how will our lives change), but there is also excitement and joy. Joy - their babies aren't even born yet, and both Mary and Elizabeth express great joy. God has been good, waiting for the babies is a time of joy. The mothers are already excited, proclaiming God's justice and the fulfillment of promises. Mary stays for three months, which means she was likely there until John's birth. It would have helped prepare Mary for what is about to happen to her.

For them, and for us, waiting for God is not a time of inaction. Waiting is a time of preparation. The parents to be would have had to prepare. We, the great

expectant receivers of the coming inbreaking of God, need to prepare. As Alison noted last week in her sermon, John's words are that we need to prepare a highway. We need to make it easy for what is to be. John's pronouncements don't come in the abstract: when he says, "Someone greater than I is coming," he's talking about his younger cousin! They may have even played with each other as children since they were only born months apart, and Jesus' ministry didn't really start in earnest until he was about 30. I can only imagine what those two boys talked about as children. "So, Jesus, Aunt Mary tells me you're going to be the Messiah." And Jesus says, "You said it". And then adds more seriously, "I'm not sure people are ready." Maybe John replied, "just watch me".

So when John gets to prophesying about his cousin, he calls for people to be baptized, change their way of living, right your relationships with others.

Baptism? He exhorts his followers and those that come to him, to change their ways and be cleansed. They don't even know what is to come. They don't know what God is going to do; they just know that they have to be prepared.

These are a people oppressed, living in darkness, and yet they come to John asking what they need to do differently, and he tells them clearly: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food

must do likewise.” Similarly, the soldiers are told to stop extorting, and the tax collectors to only collect what is owed. Why do these words sound familiar? Because they are almost identical to what Jesus would preach later according to Luke.

And then, after these exhortations, John tells them to be baptised. How does being sprinkled with water mean anything to a people that haven’t even met the Messiah? How is some watery bard lobbing water onto you through some farcical aquatic ceremony the basis for a system of self-governance, let alone ecclesial government? (Thanks, Monty Python). Well, this symbolic cleansing is full of meaning, especially in a time when physical and spiritual cleanliness were hard to maintain. I don’t want to get into the full meaning of baptism here. I just find it fascinating that people were ready to hear a message about how to live life differently and be symbolically washed without yet having even met Jesus or heard his teachings. These were people choosing to act, to be baptized, to live anew; this is what you do with a heart full of hope for the future, not even knowing what that future is to bring. This is not a passive waiting for things to come. It’s a deliberate choice, an act of hope and a declaration that you believe that God is acting and will act, even when you don’t know when it’s going to happen.

So, waiting is not a time of inaction, and choosing to live rightly and pursue justice is what you do with the hope of what is to come.

So, when will the inbreaking of God occur? When will it be time?

Considering that question, I am reminded of an experience Heather and I had this past week during one of Heather's business trips . We went to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, USA, where, as one shirt told us, Sundays are for Jesus and Football.

Well, last Sunday, Heather and I went to what was called a "Gospel Brunch" at the House of Blues in Myrtle Beach. It was a performance like no other we've attended. The group, called Special Praise, sang gospel numbers with infectious enthusiasm. Now, gospel music began emerging in the late 1700's by white composers and lyricists, although the first book of Gospel songs wasn't published until 1874. The sub-genre of Black Gospel music is deeply rooted in the spiritual experience of the African American people, a people oppressed by racism and segregation. In the 1900's, during what is called the Great Northward Migration, African Americans left the south in droves for the more hospitable areas of the United States. Tommy Dorsey in the 1930's was a huge influence on what we now associate with Black and Southern Gospel



music. Gospel music is one of the easier types of hymnody to learn – it’s fairly repetitive with easy melodies – excellent for people who may have been or are illiterate. It’s repetitive nature makes for an almost Taize-like experience, as Heather noted.

In any case, here we were in the House of Blues, caught up in the singing of Gospel tunes, by this band who were singing for Jesus...and for tips because Jesus don’t pay the mortgage. (Thanks, Heather, for that one). One of the tunes that the band sang was called “He’s an one time God”. This is marvellously catchy song, and I will include a link to one version of the song in the printed version of this sermon, and on TUMC’s Facebook page ([On Time God - Dottie Peoples](#)) . The lyrics talk about how God acts right on time; the verses describe the former Hebrew slaves of Israel being trapped at the Red Sea when God acted, or when the five thousand were fed. There was one line that caught my attention:

*He may not come when you want him,*

*But he'll be there right on time.*

Notwithstanding the masculine reference to God, this line reminds us that God acts not with predicted chronological time, or Chronos, but in Kairos

time, a time that is right for action. God acts at the right moment, even when we aren't ready or aren't expecting it. The title of the song and the recurring refrain is "He's an on time God, yes he is". This, coming from a people who were oppressed, expressing joy and hope, and faith in a God who delivers in Kairos time, and not when we want it or think we need it. What more authentic Christian joy can there be than that found in a people whose faith and hope transcends their earthly pain, singing about God's justice and God's call to right living?! Can we not do the same?

Yes, you can wait for God with joy, hope and right living, because God always acts on time. Jesus' birth will change the us and the world forever. In the meantime, we can wait by taking action in our lives now, living with hope as a Spiritually baptized people, even with the future still unwritten. When will God act? Just wait...and you will see.