

# The Journey in Waiting

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I thought I would walk on the wild side this morning and cast our gaze not on the Gospel ~ what with this being the *fifth* Sunday in a row about the “bread of life” ~ but rather on Psalm 130. Specifically, I want to think with you about the compelling question Psalm 130 offers: *what does it mean to “wait for the Lord?”*

First, some context. Psalm 130 is in the category of lament psalm. There are all kinds of psalms – psalms of penitence, praise, and thanksgiving, royal psalms, wisdom psalms. Lament psalms make up almost a third of the entire psalter and express sorrow, grief, distress – the cry of one suffering, perhaps, out of a “long, dark night of the soul.” Most lament psalms are fueled by raw, human emotion, like the familiar Psalm 13, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” In lament psalms, the poet begs the Divine for help or direction, relief or forgiveness, or justice. Things are terrible – please, God, show up, intervene, save me, restore, reconcile, show me the way, heal it, tell me you love me. Just – *help me.*

Psalm 130's lament is distinct in offering some complexity and depth to the spiritual path. Let's look at it.

v1. I'm suffering. I'm hurt, upset, in pain, in the depths of despair. I'm calling on you - hear me, listen to me.

v 2 & 3. (This is a mini-“praise psalm”) I call these the “battering up” verses – “how great thou art o Lord!” You can do anything, fix anything, heal anything. You are mighty. You forgive all, heal all. Everyone should be reverent of you.

v 4-6. Unique to this lament psalm – I've called on you. I know you can help. Now I wait. Now I wait for the Lord. Now my soul waits for the Lord. Now we all – Israel – wait for the Lord. We wait. And we trust because God is merciful. But we wait.

V 7. One more bit of praise for good measure – but I'm still waiting...

What compels is this: the bulk of Psalm 130 is about waiting. “I wait,” “my soul waits,” we all, or in this case, Israel “waits.” We're in a hard, desperate, confusing place. We've called upon the Divine to help us, to come to our aid. And now, there's nothing to do but wait, trusting that God hears us and will come alongside us to help. But we know not when or how. We're stuck in that space between the “now” and the “not yet” and all we can do is wait upon the Lord.

We know something about that here at St. David's, sitting as we've been in that uncomfortable and un-asked-for space between what was and what is to come. We're like

the trapeze artist who has let go of one bar and reaches for the next ~ suspended for a perilous moment above the ground not knowing if the next bar will even be there or if we'll successfully catch it. That perilous moment is the waiting part - that dangerous, empty space between lament and God's response.

The waiting is part of a relationship with God, part of the back-and-forth. We ask. We praise. We wait. But I imagine it's an *active* kind of waiting - the kind that requires work and intentionality on our part, asking of us a spiritual attentiveness, patience, and silence.

I am just back from walking over 100 miles of the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. I walked a different part of the Camino than I walked 15 years ago. This time, with a clergy colleague, we trekked from Santiago to the coast - to a town called Finisterre (or, the "end of the earth"), and then up along the ocean to Muxia, then back down to Santiago. The Camino dates back to the 700s and was revived in the 1100s, with pilgrim paths funneling into it from all over Europe. All paths culminate at the Cathedral de Santiago, where Jesus' disciple James was said to have traveled and whose remains (or relics) are believed to be housed there.

It's said that "everyone walks their own Camino." While the physical road is the same for everyone, the *experience* of walking is unique to each person. One thing I observed walking a long way for a long time is that the experience is comprised of a bunch of physical, emotional, and spiritual cycles. In the spiritual cycle, twice I have, before leaving, made plans to attend to specific things while walking - people to pray for, problems to work through, decisions to discern, things I want or need from God. I start on the Camino with my list of all the things - and get to chewing on them on the first day feeling oh so very pious. But what I had to learn not once but twice is that in the end, it's folly to think I can direct the experience instead of just handing myself over to it. Eventually, step after step after step, all the intentions and supplications started to fall away - I said my peace, itemized the needs I was asking God to meet, prayed the prayers until - after a few days - there was nothing left to do but to wait upon the Lord. Day after day, mile after mile, blister after blister, I fell into a kind of intense awareness, an openness to seeing and experiencing whatever God put in my path that day. All I had to do was walk, watch, and listen. I smelled the deliciousness of a Eucalyptus forest after a hard rain. I saw pilgrims taking care of each other, sharing water and Spanish Advil. I experienced unique and surprising hospitality at the hands of hotel owners and café attendants. I wondered at why the Spaniards seem to eat cured ham for every meal, yet nowhere are there any pigs. I felt the sun on my arms and the strength of my body. I waited for God with as much openness, with as much anticipation, with as much awareness as I could manage. And over time that waiting worked on me. What I saw and felt and experienced, over time, ministered to me in some deep, unexplainable way. I felt my world of concerns and supplications resolve inside of me. The hard edges and problems I brought with me didn't go away, they just eased and loosened, then dissolved into a sense of wellbeing. God responded. I had my answer.

It may also be true, too, that “waiting upon the Lord” has something to do with patience. We don’t know how or when or by what means God will minister to us in our despair or confusion or dark times. That in-between space, that waiting, necessitates a trust that God *is* listening, *is* moving, working, responding. On the Camino I read a small volume of writing by St. John of the Cross - a 16<sup>th</sup> century saint born in Avila, Spain. As an adult John met Teresa of Avila, the mother abbess of a Carmelite monastery, 20 years his senior. They formed an intense spiritual friendship and together set out to reform the Carmelite order, calling it back to the simple devotional life lived by their forebears. But John paid a high price for this alignment. When he was 29, he was abducted by the conventional Carmelite friars and imprisoned in a tiny cell not big enough for him to lie down. There he sat, for nine months. All his spiritual practice fell away, everything he thought he knew about God was in tatters, abandoned and disparaged. There he descended into what he called the dark night of the soul, stripped of everything. “[Eventually],” he later wrote in his famous work “Dark Night of the Soul,” “you stop fighting and, exhausted, rest in the darkness of unknowing. You have been drained and flattened. You sit in your brokenness and listen to the sound of your own breathing. There is nothing else to do. There is nowhere else to be. Into this darkness of the soul, you *eventually* begin to notice a subtle inflowing of sweetness and ease...Finally empty, you are free to receive the Holy one...It is a fully receptive state. Your only task is simply to be. The Holy One will do all the rest.”

In that filthy jail cell, broken yet receptive, John began to compose poetry and canticles, writing them in his head and then memorizing them. There he patiently made friends with unknowing. “What we have to do is to keep our eyes shut and walk the path in darkness if we want to be sure where we are going,” he wrote. And there, eventually, he gave himself over to the Mystery of God - to being okay, devotedly trusting even, to however or whenever God showed up. “I would not sacrifice my soul for all the beauty of this world,” he wrote, “There is only one thing for which I would risk everything: an I-don’t-know-what that lies hidden in the heart of the Mystery.”

And finally, if we are to “wait upon the Lord” it may be that we have to stop talking, that the waiting is something done in silence. We have made our petition, outlined our woes, raised our cry of help. After our words have been exhausted, only silence is left. In his gorgeous prayer, aboriginal New Zealander Brian Hardie asks, “What would happen if we stopped talking?”

We only tell you what we want you to know.  
We only speak what we can bear to admit.  
We do not say anything that would unmask our shame.  
With respect, all the rest we expect you to know.

What would be our state if we stopped talking?  
How, say, if we sit in silence and quietly look to you,  
while you quietly look at us?  
What then, God?

How long would we have to wait for you to speak?  
Would your steady gaze unravel the past?  
Would your whisper guide us through the maze?  
Would your Spirit settle our plight?

O God, if only you would give us one of your looks!  
One glance with your care would cure it all.  
One look from you would be enough.  
God, we're stopped talking,  
we are ready to trust in your vision.

It turns out that “waiting upon the Lord” asks an incredible amount of us, if we're up for it: intensive openness, patience with unknowing, silence. But it is our part to hold up in our relationship with the Holy One. We lament. We wait for the “we-don't-know-what that lies hidden in the heart of the Mystery of God.” Amen.

Sources:

Mirabai Starr, ed., *Saint John of the Cross: Luminous Darkness*, pp.31-32, 35, 73-74.

Brian Hardie, *Tranquil Moments: The Poetry of Prayer*, “God, We've Stopped Talking,” Steele Roberts, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2002.



