

Waiting With Joy

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Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. . . .” -- James 5:7

So there we were, twenty-five or so teenage boys, simultaneously energized and misshapen by adolescence: feet too big, legs too long, still trying to grow into ourselves. And all of us, for the next ninety minutes or so, on display in front of God and everybody, scantily clad in a brightly lit gymnasium.

As I looked up and down the bench of my classmates, I could see that the way we were waiting to be called into the game varied dramatically. Most of the boys – the graceful, athletic ones – were riveted on the game, pointed, like bird dogs, toward the ball. My attention, and the attention of the other unathletic kids, darted back and forth between the ball and our gym instructor and coach, Mr. Lochmueller. The athletic boys seemed eager to get into the game; the clumsy boys and the fearful boys, like me, on the other hand, were waiting for that moment very differently.

And when, at last, it came -- “You, McAfee, in! -- I sprang from the bench with as much eagerness as I could manufacture and ran to my position on the court. The play started, I guarded my man as best I could, some fool passed me the ball, and I turned this way and that trying to get rid of it as fast as I could. But no matter which way I turned, the opposing team had one of its six hundred or so players blocking my throw, and the ref’s whistle eventually signaled a turnover. I could hear the groans of frustration from my teammates. Coach Lochmueller left me in the game for another nine seconds or so, and then I got to sit out the rest of the evening on the bench with the other kids suited, like me, more for the turnovers from the oven than for the turnovers on the court.

That defining moment was over forty years ago, and it was the last time a basketball and I were on the same court at the same time. I knew I wasn’t any good at basketball, but the rules of fairness demanded that every boy – and in those days in that little town only boys played basketball for ticket-holding spectators – fairness demanded that every boy demonstrate his incompetence publicly so that the coaching staff of the high school could complete the winnowing process with clear consciences.

I remember the waiting vividly. That bench was one of my first lessons in the nature of waiting. There have been many similar lessons since, although few as memorable. A group of boys all waiting to be called into the game, some eager, some filled with dread. It could as easily have been a group of girls in ballet slippers waiting in a dance studio, or a group of children on the front row staring at the piano, but the sensation would be the same: a mixture of anticipation, excitement, eagerness, anxiety, uncertainty, and dread. Such is the nature of much of our waiting. It begins early in life, and it ends at the end for which we all, consciously or not, are waiting.

That is, all of us except Christians. We Christians are peculiar folk, because we believe that our death is not our end. We believe that we are part of something – the body of Christ – that embraces our individual lives and then allows us to transcend them.

And because we are part of that visible and invisible body, we have an identity that death cannot take from us, and we have an end beyond the grave.

That's what Jesus's words in our gospel reading speak of. When Jesus talks about the "kingdom of heaven," he's talking about that realm, that state of being in this world, that is not constrained or defined by this world. The kingdom of heaven includes this world, but it is not limited to it; it transcends it, and that's why we call it a transcendent reality. It's this world plus.

But here's one of the tricky parts about the kingdom of heaven. It's not that God's realm starts with this world and grows from it. Rather, it is from God's realm that this world was called from chaos. That's what Genesis means when it says the spirit or wind or breath of God was hovering over the primordial chaos and brought creation from it. When Jesus spoke of God's realm or the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God or just plain heaven – they all mean the same thing – that's the reality he's referring to: the reality of divine love that was here before the world, is here present in the world, and will be here long after the world, as you and I know it, is gone.

Science says it all just happened. The stuff at the beginning of the cosmos – the atoms, the molecules, the gasses and the vapors and so on – they were just hanging out until enough static electricity built up, there was a flash of lightning, and the right molecules got zapped in just the right way to start some single-cell critters that eventually evolved into you and me.

Christianity doesn't try to say that that theory of the origins of life is wrong; it simply says, Wait a minute, you're overlooking an important aspect of it. You're overlooking the part that asks, Is life a good thing or not? We believe that it is. We believe that creation is good. We believe that waterfalls are good, daisies are good, and hummingbirds are good. And since we're part of that, we're good, too. It's all good. And we acknowledge that goodness by calling it the evidence of love – God's love for us and for all creation. How God worked that love out, in its complex and mind-boggling details we look to science to tell us; but that God did it, is doing it, and will continue to do it – that we don't need science for. It's self-evident to anyone who's not, to use the biblical phrase, hard-hearted, or to use the phrase from moral theology, someone who's not invincibly ignorant.

That great love, that brought creation and all of us into being long before we got here and will still be doing it long after we're gone, is what we Christians point to without interruption and without exception. It's the first, last, and greatest miracle. Remember what Einstein said? You can go through life as though nothing is a miracle, or you can go through life as though everything is a miracle, and he preferred the latter.

And we Christians believe that you can see what that miraculous love looks like, worked out in daily living, in a first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus, whom his Jewish followers recognized as God's anointed one, the messiah. Jesus didn't try to disabuse them of that notion, although he preferred to call himself simply "The Human One," but he did try, again and again, to change their understanding and our understanding of what such a deliverer looks like. Jesus refused to use force or violence, and he refused to avoid suffering. Instead, Jesus willingly accepted violence and suffering for himself to end the cycle of violence and suffering for us, and he demanded of his followers that they do the same.

That love, that so few of us are willing to live, is the same love that brought creation into being – creation with all its suffering as well as its beauty and bounty – and that's the love that we celebrate as being made flesh in Bethlehem.

And because we believe that that's the love that will be there at whatever end there is for the world, we speak of Jesus's return as the end of the world – that is, the

point toward which the whole creation moves. End in that sense of the word – creation’s purpose, meaning, and destination.

We Christians often speak of our having faith, but in actuality it’s our participation in God’s faithfulness to us and to all creation that gives us whatever faith we have. Faith, like life, is a gift, and you get it not by manufacturing it but rather by accepting it. It is faith that allows us to see a creation as the ongoing product of divine love and not simply as nature, “red in tooth and claw.” We don’t deny the redness; we simply refuse to allow the tooth or the claw to define creation or us with it.

And that, I think, is what allows the farmer we read about in the book of James to be patient and to wait with joy. The farmer knows that God’s faithfulness does not fail. Oh, this year’s crop may fail. The rains may not come or locusts may come instead, and life may become precarious for a time. Every farmer knows that.

But every farmer also knows that eventually every drought ends, every pest moves on or dies away, and earth’s beauty and bounty return. They always do. Always.

And believing in that divine faithfulness is the source of our joy as we prepare to celebrate the birth of divine love in our midst. We believe that God was active in the world before Jesus was born. We believe that God was active in the world through Jesus. And we believe that God has continued to act in the world, through the Holy Spirit, long after Jesus. The farmer, who perhaps knows God’s faithfulness better than the rest of us, knows all of this, which is why the farmer is such a fitting image for hopeful and joyful waiting. Those who know and trust and believe in God’s faithfulness have a deep joy that no sorrow or suffering in this world can take away, because the love was here before the sorrow and it’ll be here after the sorrow has passed away. As one of our hymns puts it, “Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.”

Dear friends, as we await the celebration of the baby’s birth, let us wait with joy, trusting not in our efforts to get it right, but in God’s faithfulness that gives birth to love, in every season and in every place. “Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.” Thanks be to God.