

## **“Patience”**

Text(s): Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7; Psalm 40:1-5

- Pastor Mike Pancoast

It seems it's everywhere for everyone these days, waiting. According to a British wireless internet provider, the British business travelers spend 689,000 hours waiting in airports, with most spending 2-3 hours each per month. A survey that originated in Washington State found that its state social workers wait an average of 12 hours a month for overbooked courtrooms. One source I looked at claimed that Americans now spend approximately 15 minutes per day waiting in traffic. (I've GOT to think we're on the high end of that these days!) According to Google, that purveyor of all knowledge and data, the average Western human being spends on average 45 minutes a day waiting, whether it's filling up one's car or waiting for an elevator or waiting at the doctor or dentists or traffic lights. Over the course of 70 years, that's right around THREE YEARS of waiting!

On the more serious note, there's probably not a single one of us here who's not at least a little sick and tired of the waiting game that this summer's events have foisted upon us. We've been WAITING...to hear if we were going to evacuate. ...for the flood to hit. ...for the water to recede. ...to see the damage. ...for volunteers to help with mucking out and for contractors. ...for dikes and levees to be torn down and for the equipment on the streets that is doing the hauling. ...to hear about future flood control or even to see if we're going to have to do this all over again next year. I suspect that this ALL has added to the general testiness we're probably detecting in folks in our community these days. Patience has simply begun to wear thin, and we've got a long, LONG way to go. “*We're All Being Brought Back*” might be our preaching theme this year, but exactly **how long must we wait?**

Abraham and Sarah know a little something about waiting. At the point at which we meet them today, it's been twenty-five years since God first spoke to Abraham...then called Abram...calling him from a comfortable, apparently prosperous life from the region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that we would now call Iraq. “*Go from the security and comfort of this place to a land that I will show you...eventually. Leave this place of prosperity, for another place where your descendants will prosper and grow...someday,*” God first says to Abraham. (You can read about that in Genesis 12.) And in one of the most vivid Abraham stories in the Bible, God speaks to Abraham as he gazes into the heavens on one of those starry nights when it seems every star ever created is visible: “*Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. ...So shall your descendants be,*” God promised. And Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted Abraham as a good and righteous man because of that faith. (Gen. 15:5-6).

But that had been 25 years ago. Almost as long as most mortgages. Long enough to get special designation, a “Silver Anniversary.” I've been married longer than most these days, and I'm almost a decade away from even considering such a milestone! “*So shall your descendants be,*” God had said to Abraham. Descendants are one thing—how about a son to start with!?! Maybe you've known couples who would make such incredible parents and yet for whatever reason can not, are not able to have children...20 years of frustration while everyone else grows their families. Year after year, after year. There comes a point...we know about biology and physiology and such...there comes point, doesn't there, when a couple just gives up. How long must we wait for God to throw us a bone here? Anyone have a sense of what that kind of frustration, that kind of impatience, that kind of waiting feels like?

When we meet Abraham and Sarah at this oak oasis amid the rolling hills and plains of that area, they are now well into the sunset of their golden years...99 years old for Abraham. At what point does one start simply to let go of the apparently ridiculous hope and dream of a promise long since dried up? Descendants, indeed. We can't even have a son.

What do we do when the dream has died? Where do we turn when our patience has run out? What do we do when can't wait any more? At what point do we give up? At what point did Abraham and Sarah give up?

I do not think that the point of the story is, “*If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.*” If it were, I do not think we would have verse 11’s biology lesson. The text tells us bluntly about the situation: v. 11, “*Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.*” These were ancient people, but they knew where babies came from. At what point did they stop trying? At one point did the prospect of having children now dwell in the realm of the ridiculous?

No, dear friends, I think the point of the story is, “*God is faithful to his people, to his Word, to his promise even to the most ridiculous extreme.*” And even when facing a dying ember of hope and patience, even in the face of a long-since dead spark of fertility, Abraham and Sarah were renewed, were reinvigorated, were restored in a hope long dead. For them, it was as simple a word as a repeat of what they had heard before over the last 25 years: “*I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son*” (v. 10). What made it different this time only God knows, but they must have believed enough to have tried again. They must have believed enough that God IS good to his Word to defy even what they thought they knew and saw and understood about the world around them.

That kind of rebirth of hope, patience, and faith is not a simple thing. How many 80-year olds do you know who even WANT to have children of their own at that point in their lives? Why bother, at that point! How many of you want to overly get your hopes up about a speedy resolution to our present dilemmas only to certainly have them dashed again? Because I am certain it will happen, aren’t you? **And yet still...here is this story that seeks to invite us to believe that God is here with us even in the midst of our dashed hopes.**

And so we wait. Really, what choice do we have? All our impatience, all our frustration and anger still doesn’t seem to change the situation much, other than making us all the more ill-tempered.

But maybe it’s a matter of HOW we wait that matters. Abraham and Sarah could have been dried up, bitter old curmudgeons...and maybe even Sarah IS. (It IS possible that her laughter is rather cynical and sarcastic as she hears this fool’s prognostication about her impending pregnancy.) But there is a graciousness about them that defies the bitterness we might expect. Even in their impatience, Abraham and Sarah respond to the possibility of service set before them in their guests not just with common courtesy but even with extravagant hospitality. A bit of water, a crust of bread, space under the shade tree could’ve been fine for the custom of the day of extending shelter to the weary traveler. Abraham and Sarah serve their guests and meet them in their need in a manner above and beyond. Perhaps there is something that changes in us when we serve God by serving others not just well but sacrificially?

Finally, the Book of Psalms offers us something to do in the midst of our waiting, as well, as apparently waiting and impatience is as old the Bible itself, and that “something to do in the midst of our waiting” is PRAYER...a matter of inclining our hearts to God, even in the midst of our impatience, even to say, as the bumper sticker theologian might, “*God give me patience, and give it to me right now.*” Patience is not a simple thing, so how can prayer in the midst of impatience be a simple thing? I don’t want to suggest that it is. But what I do want to suggest is that it changes US, even if it doesn’t apparently change our situation. Prayer is an act of faith because even if it doesn’t effect the outcome for which we hope, or even demand, faithful prayer assumes that there is a God and that God hears and answers our prayers. That God might not answer with result we expect is another sermon and further invitation to grow. But if for no other reason, prayer is good for us because through it, we enter into the presence of God who is good to his Word...who keeps his promises...who has entered our human existence through the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, through whom he has even vanquished the power of death.

God grant us patience. And God grant it right now. Amen.