

“To you, O LORD I lift up my soul. My God I put my trust in you.” (Ps. 25:1)

We wait all day long. Waiting is sometimes what life is about. There’s all the daily mundane waiting we do; waiting for the coffee to perk, or drip (or whatever it does these days), waiting for a turn at the gas pump and then waiting for the gas to fill the tank, waiting for the computer to boot up and waiting for it to retrieve email. Waiting. I spend my whole life waiting for everyday stuff. I wait for my lunch to heat up in the microwave. I wait to check out at the grocery store. I wait at the doctor’s office, dentist’s office, post office. I wait for dinner to cook, wait for the news to come on. And sometimes at night I wait to fall asleep. I bet your list of daily waiting isn’t so much different from mine.

But there are more serious times of waiting too for all of us. We wait for a diagnosis. We wait for work. We wait for news from a friend or a loved one, maybe one serving overseas. We wait at the hospital. I have a friend who waits in jail and his family anxiously waits for him to be released. He counts the days and weeks and months.

This kind of waiting can be torturous. With the more mundane waiting we pass the time reading or listening to music. We can day dream, or talk to someone else who is waiting. But in the serious sort of waiting there is nothing that can distract us for long. Worry and anxiety take over. There is, in some of these waiting times, nothing that can make the time pass faster. And in some cases we don’t even **want** the time to pass faster because of fear of what the end of the waiting will bring.

The people in our readings today are waiting on some of the most important events in history, - events that were a matter of life and death. How did they wait?

Well, let’s look at how Jeremiah waited for the destruction of Jerusalem; He waited in faith. Let me tell you about Jeremiah. “Surely the days are coming, the Lord says.” That is how

each prophecy that Jeremiah makes starts out. “Surely the days are coming”. That’s sort of Jeremiah’s code for: “something is going to happen and you and I have to get ready for it.” Now, Jeremiah was not a well fed priest hanging out with the crème de la crème of Israel. Jeremiah prophesied doom and destruction for Jerusalem in a time of great prosperity. So, he wasn’t very popular. The days were coming when Jerusalem would be sacked and Jeremiah tried to warn the leaders of this. He was put in prison for his trouble. But it turned out that his prophecies were true.

In 586 BC Jerusalem fell for good to the Babylonians and many were taken away into exile. Afterwards, Jeremiah prophesied that God would be faithful and will keep his covenant. A remnant of the people would return from exile, he said. The people were called to wait in faith. As an act of his own faith, he bought a piece of property in the midst of the siege and he even insisted on paying the regular market price as a testimony to his faith that Judah had a future and that God would execute justice and righteousness. “For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” (Jer. 32:15)

Let’s now turn to the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. They were told to wait in love. It is thought that perhaps the church that Paul started in Thessalonica had perhaps turned its back on him in his absence. As Paul did with many of his churches, he started them, stayed a while and then moved on. Maybe they had some other preacher come through town who taught something different from Paul, or maybe the people were reverting to their former worship of idols or other gods. So, Paul, who was then in Athens, sent his friend Timothy to go see how things were going in Thessalonica. He came back with a good report, and it is this letter that Paul then sent to them following Timothy’s return.

Paul says that he wants to see them face to face to restore their faith. He then says that he prays that their hearts be strengthened in holiness. You’ve got to stay with the program, he tells them. Jesus **will** come again with all his saints. And if you love one another while you are

waiting, it will all work out as God intends. Wait abounding in love, Paul says. Do something for your neighbor, get right with someone with whom you have had an argument, be a friend to someone who is friendless.

So, we've got Jeremiah buying a field while he is waiting for God's redemption, and we have Paul telling his people to love each other while they wait for Jesus' return. Active waiting is what is going on in both of these cases. They are waiting with purpose and action.

I remember going on a very different retreat one year, at least different for me. It was a centering prayer retreat which called for silence for several days. I knew that I was going to be having quite a bit of quiet time and I probably wasn't going to be allowed to have my computer, so I brought with me a couple of books and my knitting. I'll at least get some reading done for an upcoming Bible Study, I thought, and I was really hoping to finish a sweater for my son.

To my surprise, I was told at the monastery that on this particular retreat I was encouraged, they used the word "encouraged" not only to not use my computer, but also not to read anything, and not to knit. What! I was going to have to be silent and sit still for three days with nothing to read and nothing to keep my hands busy? I have to tell you I have never been so bored in all my life that first day. I am so accustomed to filling up my days with distractions, some worthy and good, and some not so much. But I started to learn how to wait and pray quietly, and not expect to escape via a book or my email, or my knitting. I learned there to wait with a purpose rather than a distraction. My purpose, I came to see, was to gain hope.

But this isn't practical, you may say to me. What good does hope do? It's not doing something active like we have seen with Jeremiah and Paul. Well, it may not be practical as the world sees it. Hope gets a bad rap in every season. In the Christmas season it is seen as the overdone sentiment that graces our Christmas cards. After all, hope is what you do when

there's nothing else to do, right? When things are downright hopeless there is only some meager, pathetic hope left. Hope is dangerous too. It can lead us to unrealistic expectations. God forbid that we have unrealistic expectations. Hope can lead people astray into thinking that something that is really impossible might actually happen.

And even if we rehabilitate "hope" following the Psalms and Paul's wonderful words in the letter to the Romans, no matter what hope I have in Jesus and the upcoming celebration of his birth, I'm still going to have the same old life the day after Christmas as I did the day before Christmas. Except the day after will bring all the Christmas bills in the mail. Can hope change anything? Maybe it can if we listen to the words of Jesus as he speaks in the days just before his crucifixion.

The passage from the Gospel of Luke this morning seems out of place in the Lectionary. But this passage has been read on the first Sunday of Advent for hundreds of years. Still it seems odd to hear Jesus speak of the end of the world when we are waiting for his arrival as a babe in a manger. But while we await the baby Jesus, we also wait for Christ to come again. And who could teach us about waiting any better than Jesus himself.

The news spread fast through Jerusalem that a fellow named Jesus was teaching in the temple about some very different things. Crowds came to listen to him. What Jesus taught them was that there would be a time, similar to what Jeremiah told the people in his day, there would be a time of destruction ahead. And indeed there was. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70 of the Common Era (or Anno Domini). Jesus wanted the people to know that it would be a time to pay attention. Jesus told the people to hope for God's promises. He told them that they already know how to see the signs in nature that changes are coming. They know how to tell that spring is coming long before it does. So, Jesus says to them and to us, if you know how to read those signs, then you should also be able to read the signs that the Kingdom of God is coming. That kind of hope is realistic and active. Keep alert, he says.

End of world talk is difficult for us, because it seems so strange. We know that many have predicted the end of the world and it hasn't happened. We also have read end-of-the-world tales in books and have seen end of the world stories on the small screen and the big screen. They seem far-fetched and those stories do not help us to hope, they just are meant to titillate and entertain.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.” We are to live a life of hopefulness not one that seeks pleasure for its own sake, or gets bogged down in fears. We must remember too that in all that Jesus said, he himself was in his own time of waiting for what was to become of him in a few days at his passion; before Pilate, the chief priests and on the cross.

Advent is here and the waiting has begun for us as a people of faith. The message from scripture is: **Be ready:** for the coming of Christ, for the end of our own days and for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Follow the examples of Jeremiah, Paul, the Psalmist, and of course, of Jesus. We should wait as he waited; with hope that the people would understand his message, with love for those who listened to him, and even for those who would not, and with faith that God's redemption would and will be complete.