

Why Wait?
The Second Sunday in Advent
Psalm 13
December 9, 2018
First Baptist Church, Pottstown
Rev. Dr. Marcia Bailey, preaching

“Why aren’t you angry with God,” a close rabbi friend asked me as I drove home from dinner last Monday night. “Angry?” I responded. “I don’t know; I guess it never occurred to me to be angry.” “It didn’t *occur* to you?” she said. “I would be *so ticked off* with God if my life was going the way yours has been for the last few weeks. Go ahead and get angry; God can take it!”

I thought about what she said as we continued to talk and as I sat in my driveway, she prayed for me over the phone, asking God to give me the courage to feel whatever it was I was feeling, even anger. She went on to ask God to reassure me that that things would be ok; she asked God to remind me that God would always be faithful. Finally, she asked God to light the Advent candles of hope and peace in my heart, even as I prayed that God would light the Hanukkah candles in her own. When I went inside, I read the scripture I had been pondering for this morning, this psalm of anger and deliverance. I began to wonder about how I really *did* feel about God in that moment. I began to wonder if maybe *you* haven’t had moments when you felt the same.

The Psalmist is furious with God! Not only angry but discouraged, defeated, deflated by what seems like endless waiting for God’s just response.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
²How long must I bear painⁱⁿ in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps 13: 1-2)

It's unclear what the problem has actually been: was this person treated unfairly by co-workers or their boss? Did this person feel like they had done all the work and gotten no acknowledgement? Did they have the sense of being cut off, alone, like God wasn't listening to them anymore? Were they victims of abuse or neglect or trauma who wondered what kind of God would leave them to such a fate? There is no way of telling exactly what was happening to the person who sang this song of lament, who made this cry of injustice, who pushed back against this God who seemed obscured. But in some ways, I guess the particulars don't really matter; it's the *feelings* that matter. The feelings they expressed loud enough and long enough to be captured by the writer; the feelings that were universal enough to make the cut in the holy canon; the feelings that are real enough that they resonate across the ages. "How long, O God, will we need to wait?"

We are thinking about waiting this Advent season; waiting for the coming of the Christ among us, waiting for the fulfillment of the promises that lead to life. My friend's suggestion seemed to me to fly in the face of waiting, as does this Psalm. Why wait after all? If God isn't going to show up, why stick around? Maybe waiting isn't the answer; maybe it's time to take matters into our own hands.

And that's what plenty of folks do! They take matters into their own hands. They walk away from the church, from God, from whatever needs to be transformed in their lives because they are tired of waiting, weary of living on God's time rather than their own. Waiting makes them feel powerless, impotent, stagnant. Better to act than to wait. Better to do than to be. Better to charge ahead than to sit it out. Why bother to wait?

I realized as I thought about my friend's invitation to challenge God was that one of the reasons I *was* willing to wait was because I didn't want to make God mad at me! I didn't dare risk *losing* God. Even though God's face was hard to see, even though God's voice was difficult to hear, even though God's presence seemed far away, I didn't dare *not believe*; I couldn't risk not trusting. If this is how it felt when God was supposedly present, I couldn't imagine what it would feel like to know that God had walked away.

Maybe you've felt that way: not sure if God was working for or against you. Not certain that God was on your side, yet not crazy enough to risk ticking God off lest God actually abandon you. Or maybe it *does* feel like God *has* abandoned you; like God has "left the building" and you are all alone, that no one cares, that you are on your own to figure it out, make your way, do whatever has to be done in order to find justice, in order to know peace. I had that feeling the other day too, like everyone else was doing just fine and I alone was paying the price.

It was about that time that I found another interpretation of the very same psalm, the one found on the other side of the page printed in your bulletin. I asked Dennis to read the New Revised Standard version (NRSV) this morning but now I want to read you another version, from the contemporary translation called The Message:

Long enough, GOD—
 you've ignored me long enough.
I've looked at the back of your head
 long enough. Long enough
I've carried this ton of trouble,
 lived with a stomach full of pain.
Long enough my arrogant enemies
 have looked down their noses at me. (Ps 13:1-2)

So, there you have it: *this* person is angry with God! If we weren't sure how the psalmist felt in the other version, this one seems clear. "Long enough, God." "I'm done: done with feeling alone, done with feeling abandoned, done with feeling like you aren't with me." Some of you know this feeling; some of you have prayed this prayer. This person isn't willing to wait anymore; that time's past. Now is the time for something else; the thing is, what?

What are we to do in this Advent season, in this time of deepening shadow and lack of light? How does singing songs of expectation make a difference? How does lighting two small candles make illuminate our way? What are we do to when we are angry with God, when waiting seems impossible, when we are tempted to take matters into our own hands, be our own god? What do we do? How do we pray? I went back to re-read the psalm.

The NRSV reads, "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death...." The Message says, "Take a good look at me, GOD, my God; I want to look life in the eye...." Ah! This is not the angry pray-er, not the desperate pray-er but the pray-er that begins to change the conversation and the prayer that begins to change the heart.

Because with these words, the one whose praying begins to notice *who* is alienated from *whom*; it is not *God* who has moved away, but them. It's not God who has abandoned us but rather it is **we** who have abandoned God.

I am the one who lost sight of the Holy; *I am* the one who trusted in something, someone other than God. When the psalmist asks for "light" and "life", *that's* when God's presence is revealed. The one who prays this prayer, like us, can remember a time when God was present, when God's Light did brighten the way. In shifting the tone from accusation to invitation, the psalmist opens the space for God's presence to be revealed again: "I want to look life in the

eye". This is a prayer that attaches the one who prays it directly to God. This is the prayer of one who remembers and is willing to trust again.

"I've thrown myself headlong into your arms—
I'm celebrating your rescue.
I'm singing at the top of my lungs,
I'm so full of answered prayers." (Ps 13:5-6)

...The psalm ends. These words don't mean the struggle is over, but rather that with God's abiding presence the powerlessness of waiting is transformed into anticipation of God's blessed response. In renewing their hope and trust in God, the one who prayed this desperate, lonely prayer can now experience the peace of the assurance of a divine answer. This one is confident in the enduring power of the presence of Light and Love.

As I was writing these thoughts I opened a hand-written note from a friend, who had enclosed in her card the very smallest candle I may have ever seen; it's just an inch high. And with it was a tiny candle holder and the invitation to kindle this little light against the darkness of this season of waiting.

God invites you—angry, resentful, sad, hopeful, joyful---to light a candle in whatever place you find yourself in this Advent season for even the smallest of lights can illuminate our spirits and bring us peace.

All Knowing and Loving God,

As the earth moves farther from the sun and the length of days continue to shorten, we find ourselves in shadows and darkness more than light.

As we wait for your Advent coming, we find ourselves overwhelmed with business and anxious in a season of supposed happiness and peace.

Shelter us in these quiet moments as we collect our thoughts and prayers, as we breathe in the your calming presence....here our hearts' cry this day and be swift to answer us.

Some of us mourn, O God, the loss of those we've loved, the dislocation of home or family, the disconnect from jobs, relationships, familiarity...all things that set us adrift, that hide us in shadow, that separate us from our sense of self and sometimes also from you.

Some of us are hungry, O God, for love and relationship, for justice and equity, for new vision and hope, for empowerment and spirit.

Some of us are broken, O God, in body, in spirit, in mind. We need healing—physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically. We need restoration and wholeness to become whole again.

Some of us are longing, O God, for a deeper experience of you. For new direction and new ways of thinking about ourselves and each other. We need to find the path of love in a world of hate. We need to see You.

So, hear our prayers...for each other and for ourselves.

Hear our prayers...for our community of faith and for the community of the world in which we live. Because the shadows deepen. Because the needs keep growing. Because we are waiting for a peace that only you can give.

A peace that unites rather than divides.

A peace that includes rather than excludes.

A peace that welcomes the immigrant and the poor; that calls to the weary and grief-stricken: calls to them that there is hope, that there is light, that there is love coming.....always coming in this Advent time of waiting, in the life we live in the One who is born for us.

Bless our worship, our concert this afternoon and all who would come to celebrate this season with us. Open our hearts to receive your blessing; open our spirits to embrace your peace.

All this we ask in the name of the Prince of Peace for whom we wait, amen.

