

WAITING FOR GOD

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Grace Church in New York
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Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." (Isaiah 35:4)

Eight days ago I read a news story in connection with the 78th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. On December 7th, 1941, when the great battleship USS Arizona exploded and sank, over eleven-hundred sailors were entombed within her hull. Only 337 survived. On other battleships, particularly the Oklahoma and West Virginia, hundreds of men were trapped alive in air pockets as the massive ships overturned and sank. In the succeeding days desperate rescue efforts proved futile. Those who survived above had no way to reach those who survived below, and could only listen to a sound that would haunt them for the rest of their lives: the tapping – the tapping of living men banging metal on metal, tapping for help from six decks below, tapping that persisted and did not fall silent for more than two weeks.

Of all the human history worth being written down and remembered, what we will never know are the things that were spoken among those trapped sailors, and hoped for, and prayed for during their long, long wait in the deep darkness. Surely they wondered about a rescue. Does anybody up there hear us? Does anyone know we're trapped down here? Is anyone coming to save us? How long must we wait? It was a question that would profoundly trouble the surviving sailors, so much so that 43 of the 337 who escaped from the Arizona would choose the sunken ship to be their final resting place upon their own deaths. And so, eight days ago scuba divers carried the urn of the last crewman to be buried aboard the Arizona into the depths of the ship. It was as if to say to those lost nearly eighty years ago, "we could not reach you in life, but we will reach you in death. We won't keep you waiting forever."

Few people will ever know the awful distress of waiting that the sailors trapped below decks endured. Even still, waiting for anything is an experience that we tend not to enjoy. Witness the anguish of John the Baptist in today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (11:2-11). John, as you may remember, preached a consistent theme his whole life: that the long-awaited Messiah was at hand. Centuries before John, Isaiah had preached good news to the people in exile. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah was coming to rescue them from captivity. *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (35:1-10)*. All this and more was God's promise to his people, whose calling it was simply to be faithful and wait. The problem was, they had been waiting for centuries. Too many had lived and died without seeing God's promised Messiah. But then along came John the Baptist who preached with a fiery certainty that their wait was nearing an end. With every step that Jesus took, John was convinced that the long wait was over. The Messiah had arrived.

But not today. Today we find John totally out of character, like a reed shaken by the wind. Today he is not so sure; his fire and brimstone seem extinguished. Today we find John in Herod's prison awaiting his execution. From there he sent some of his disciples to inquire of Jesus, *are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* So John had devoted his entire ministry to announcing the Messiah's arrival. Now, with not much time left, he was doubting and weary and wondering if the waiting would ever end. His great fear was that the Messiah would be a no-show after all.

We don't like waiting. Witness the eager faces of young children who still have an impossibly long ten days to wait before tearing open their gifts on Christmas morning. They

have to wait. Waiting is an unavoidable reality of life. A recent study claims that in the course of a lifetime, the average person spends six months waiting in line. Six months of your life! Some people spend their whole lives waiting: waiting for the human relationships we crave. Especially at this time of year people long for significant connections with a spouse, or a parent, or a child. People long for loves they have lost or never had. But then, even when we are physically present to each other, we wait and yearn for more. We have a strange ache for a love that is perfect and permanent, a love that no other person can possibly fulfill. So we each live trapped within ourselves, entombed within our own inescapable individuality. Does anyone know I'm in here? Is anyone coming to save me from myself?

Ultimately, the redeemer for whom we wait is God. We pray, we tap like the sailors in the hope that God will hear us and come and rescue us from our waiting. We sing songs of longing:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

And we pray the impatient Collect for this Third Sunday of Advent, "*Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us ... speedily help and deliver us.*" When will the one who is coming finally come? When will he come to bring a renewal of your spirit, to banish your doubts, to heal your sickness, to rid the world of evil and suffering and anguish? When will he come? We don't know. We have to wait for God.

The theme of waiting for God is a dilemma that many great and creative minds have pondered. One of them was Samuel Beckett, who took on the subject on in his play, *Waiting for Godot*. In 1954 Beckett first introduced us to the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who apparently have an appointment to meet a man named Godot. Neither seems to know who Godot is, why they are waiting for him, when he will appear, or even whether they would recognize him if he did. Yet through two acts of the play the two tramps never move from one location: a lonely tree near a country roadside. They remain fixated on their appointment with Godot, passing the time in meaningless conversation and speculation, vainly trying to entertain themselves, even contemplating suicide. For them, life is a daily, and perhaps pointless effort to fill the time and pass the hours. In both acts of the play a young boy arrives on scene to announce, "Mr. Godot told me to tell you that he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow." So the play ends, leaving us to believe that every tomorrow will find Vladimir and Estragon in the same spot, still waiting for Godot, still struggling to fill all the meaningless minutes.

Waiting for Godot and waiting for God remind me of a story I heard about two young boys who were brothers. The older brother enjoyed teasing his younger brother. Imagine that! He would often say, "I have a chocolate bar in my room, and I will give it to you tomorrow morning." Sure enough, at the crack of dawn the younger brother would rush into the older boy's room and announce, "You promised me a chocolate bar tomorrow. It's tomorrow!" Of course, the older boy would reply, "No it isn't. Now it's today. But *tomorrow* I will give you a chocolate bar." "The coming of the Lord is near," wrote James. "Behold, your God," said Isaiah. "The Lord is e'en at hand," sings the choir. "*Tomorrow* shall be my dancing day," says a popular carol. "Mr. Godot is surely coming *tomorrow*," said the boy on stage. But the problem with tomorrow is this: it's never tomorrow. It's always today. Perhaps John's worst fears are true: the Messiah may be coming tomorrow, which means, in effect, that he will be a no-show today.

Regarding Samuel Beckett's play, many literary types have concluded what others have also quietly come to believe in their despair: that our existence is absurd, and that waiting on God to arrive with salvation is of no greater or lesser merit than anything else you might do. It's

all meaningless. To be sure, we can admire the perseverance of Vladimir, who declares, “*We have kept our appointment and that’s an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?*” But Godot – or God – doesn’t seem to be keeping his end of the appointment, and may not even exist.

Well let me tell you what I hear and see. Godot does exist, he knows where the tramps are, and he knows their dilemma. The arrival of the boy messenger confirms that Vladimir and Estragon haven’t imagined Godot or their appointment with him. So it is with those who wait for the Lord in Advent and throughout the year. God lives. God knows we are here. God knows our dilemma and hears our cries. What is more, God taps back to us, trapped as we are within these confines of time and space. If we listen with what Isaiah called “unstopped ears” we can hear God’s tapping back at us through the mystery of existence itself, through the laws of nature, through the inexplicable presence of love in an otherwise savage world, through art and poetry and music. We can hear God’s tapping to us through the goodness and love made known to us in creation, through the calling of Israel to be God’s people, through the Word spoken by the prophets, and above all, through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. The Messiah did come. The Messiah does come. The Messiah will come.

The voice of the Lord is not rare. The universe is not silent. The heavens declare the glory of God. But it takes faith. It takes practice to listen for the sounds of God’s tapping. Many years ago, when Morse Code was the high-tech instant messaging system that smart phones are today, a young man applied for a job as a wireless operator. He arrived at a busy office, filled with the noise of many voices and, appropriately enough, a telegraph machine tapping out messages. He filled out the appropriate form, then took his place at the end of a long line of other applicants. There they sat and waited for what felt like a lengthy period of time. Behind a closed door was the man they were supposed to see, but he seemed to be keeping none of his appointments, neither calling anyone inside nor coming out himself.

Suddenly, the one applicant who had arrived last sat up straight, then stood up, walked across the room, and went boldly into the employer’s office. The others assumed the young man would be escorted quickly out for his impertinence. Instead, the employer came out with the young man and announced, “Gentlemen, thank you for coming, but the job has been filled.” The others complained, “How can this be? This fellow came in last, and you didn’t even give us the chance to see you.” The employer replied, “I’m sorry, but while you’ve been waiting here, I have been tapping out the following message in Morse Code on the telegraph over there: ‘If you hear this message and understand it, then come into my office. The job is yours.’ This young man is the only one who responded, so the job is his.”

We wait for God. We wait for God, crying out from the depths of our being, sometimes struggling to get through the day and pass the time. Perhaps like Vladimir and Estragon we can boast that we have kept our appointment. But all the while it is God who is tapping out messages of love and meaning and salvation, and waiting for us to respond. It is God who is tapping out messages, even the Word spoken through the prophet Isaiah that we’ve heard today: *Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”* And so we sing:

O come, thou Dayspring from on high,
and cheer us by thy drawing nigh;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death’s dark shadow put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!