

Waiting; Grumbling; Trusting

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr
on September 18 at Peace United Church of Christ

Once upon a time God had a child named Israel. For years Israel cried that he wanted someone, anyone to come and free him from slavery in Egypt. So after arranging for Moses to be called via a burning bush, and, after a great deal of hoopla in Egypt including a host of plagues and a famous last second Hollywood escape through a stormy sea, Israel was set free! The chains of slavery were behind him and the promised land was in front. And so with his heart bursting in gratitude, Israel said to God, are we there yet? I'm hungry. When are we going to eat? Are we there yet? When's dinner? Is it going to be like this the whole way? I'm bored. When are we going to eat? Are we there yet?

Now God, knowing how kids could be, had hired a couple of nannies to go with Israel on this trip. Their names were Moses and Aaron and they were good nannies. They knew the desert heat could cause dehydration, induce hallucinations and even affect memory recall and so they were patient. But one morning Israel woke up and saw a flaky substance on the ground. And the kid looked at it and said, "What's that?" And by the way, *manna* literally means "what's that?" And Moses and Aaron said, "That's your breakfast." "I'm not eating that," said Israel, "I wanna go back to Egypt."

"Now wait just a doggone second, said Aaron, "You were complaining so loudly in Egypt that the Almighty heard it." Then Moses chimed in, "Hey, that's right! Look I had a nice shepherding job! With sheep! I didn't have to talk to anybody and then the next thing you know I'm talking to a bush and then I'm talking to the Pharaoh all so as to help you! God answered your prayers, this is what you wanted and you are going to the promised land. And then Israel said "I wish I had died in Egypt when I had everything I wanted." At which point he burst into tears and ran to his tent and slammed the tent flap shut.

I know it's funny. Except it's not. We have become a society of children. Congress and the legislature in Raleigh are prime examples of what happens when you have individuals in charge who have little to NO ability to engage in adult behaviors like delayed gratification and acceptance of responsibility. We are culture bereft of elders. The Iroquois elders made decisions with the next 7 generations in mind. Our so-called leaders can't look beyond the next election cycle. Governance, leadership, wisdom and a concern for the commonwealth have been replaced with non-stop campaigning. And the kids... we want what we want and we want it now. But what we need is castor oil. What we need is for the parents to jerk a few of the kids in place and say "You will NOT treat your brothers and sisters in such a fashion way. But the kids, that'd be us, believe we are entitled to do whatever we want whenever we want it. So we scream "No fair!" The kids want the store and the politicians want to be re-elected.

But God is not a politician seeking re-election, nor a child with a warped sense of time. And it would appear that God is very uncomfortable with or hesitant to use instantaneous methodologies. Abraham and Sarah, I'm going to give you a kid! Thank-you God. 15 years later they're saying, "Um... God, do you remember that kid you promised?" The Hebrews were crying in Egypt. God said I'm going to give you a promised land. 40 years later. And then, even after all that waiting and walking, Moses didn't even go into the promised land. Upon their arrival they set up shop but they had to wait for a king, and for the glory of Jerusalem to be established. They also waited in captivity for 40 years after which they waited for the glory of Jerusalem to be re-established. And they waited for a messiah; for centuries. And even after he arrived he had to grow up. Thirty years later. When he left he said he'd be back. 2000 years later and some are still waiting. The story of God's people would seem to be a story of waiting.

I want to share with you a quote by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Chardin was a theologian, a Jesuit, but he was also a paleontologist. He studied fossils and **yes**, he absolutely believed that God acts and works through the long, long process of evolution. Chardin was used to thinking in terms of millions of years, not the next news or the next election cycle. He had the ability to take a wider, longer & slower perspective than most of us. This quote is found in your bulletin:

Above all trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We would like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability - and that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow, let them shape themselves without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make you tomorrow. Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming with you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that His hand is leading you and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Now folks if you think I'm preaching on this because I'm an expert then even after 6 months you don't know me very well. I spent most of 2010 waiting; waiting for someone to help me put my socks after 2 surgeries; waiting to be let out of the back seat of the car; waiting for somebody to take me here; waiting for a job; waiting for my house to sell; waiting for tomorrow. And yet, I think that was exactly what I was supposed to have done. I think there was some benefit to being in flux. I needed time to rest and heal, physically and psychologically and spiritually. I needed time to get my feet and confidence back under me. I wouldn't have chosen it, but I needed the time to be still. I needed the time to learn, not patience, but to learn trust. When I really get anxious, it's not that I'm impatient. Rather, I have trouble trusting, especially if I'm not in control. But I don't think I'm the only one here with trust issues.

Both as individuals and as a congregation, you find yourself waiting in places where you do not want to be. It's hard waiting for a new pastor, hard waiting for healing, for reconciliation, for employment, for answers; for whatever new thing it is we're waiting for. And worse yet, it's hard to trust while we wait.

And our culture doesn't help us. At all. Just out of curiosity yesterday, I went to the Harris Teeter website and typed in the word instant. Here's what I got: Instant coffee; instant oatmeal, instant eye reviver, instant breakfast, instant nutritional drinks, instant grits, instant mashed potatoes, instant pudding, instant brown rice, instant noodles, instant gatorade, instant heat curling iron, instant cheekbones contouring blush, instant crazy glue, instant read thermometer, instant eyebrow shapers, instant hand sanitizer, instant miso soup, instant masa corn flour (is there any other kind of masa flour?), instant age rewind eye brightener, instant goat milk, instant dry mist sun block, instant cuticle remover, instant stain remover, instant tarnish remover, and instant mac & cheese in a cup. In all 205 items showed up under the word "instant." And that's just food and make up.

Hand written letters have been replaced by emails which have been all but replaced by texting. It's instant you see. We want to stream music and video. Now. Media has become an on-demand phenomena. And THAT is the mentality with which we approach our faith. But it doesn't work. It also doesn't work for parenting or community building or education or a host of other things, but it certainly doesn't work for faith formation and spiritual journeys. You can't get there overnight

About a year ago I talked with our associate conference minister about a particular church in our conference. He said, "I wouldn't go there if I were you." Why do you say that? "They don't care who they get just so long as they get somebody." Wednesday at our local UCC minister's gathering one of the ministers told me he had gone to interview at a church. From the moment he arrived he knew they didn't care who they got, so long as they got a warm body. And so he didn't go which means they had to wait longer, all because they couldn't manage their anxiety. Another friend of mine is an associate pastor. The senior pastor has been there less than a year and already a majority of the church has asked him to leave. They asked me to come or at least to apply several years ago. I said no. I told them they hadn't done the work and that their next pastorate would end in a disaster if they didn't do the work. Sometimes I hate being right.

So where are you going? What kind of church do you want to be? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What are your core values? Where do you want to be in 10 years? What is your mission? These are the questions you need to answer as you continue on your journey of discernment, because the question isn't who will be your next pastor. The question is: where is God calling you to go?

Folks, God is still active, still busy giving birth to that which is holy in your life. BUT that nobody and no organization can bypass the gestation process. A physical pregnancy lasts 9 months. But most spiritual gestations are much longer. Sorry; no magic wands here. There is only a journey; a journey for Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Ruth and David and Esther and Joseph and Mary and Paul and yes, even Jesus. What makes you think you can get out the easy way? After all, there is no easy way, no quick fixes, no shortcuts. There IS the journey before us. So I say to you again:

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