

## Waiting for God

Texts: Mark 1:29-39; Isaiah 40:21-31

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus virtually blasts onto the scene. Mark announces at the outset of the Gospel, without mincing words, that what follows is “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” As soon, then, as Jesus appears and is baptized by John, the heavens open and announce that this is God’s Son. Jesus himself in his first words declares that the kingdom of God is at hand, and he means that it is present in himself; he proceeds to demonstrate the fact by calling for repentance, calling hard working fishermen from their nets which they drop at a moment’s notice, and teaching with an authority unheard of in Israel. Demons are cast out and the sick are healed; the very principalities and powers that ruled human life up to this point are exiled. Clearly a new power, God’s power, has arrived on the scene. There has been in the fullest sense regime change. Israel’s waiting for God’s kingdom clearly seems to be over.

But amidst all these extroverted demonstrations, we find that Jesus continually keeps slipping away from the crowd that follows him after – and because of – these demonstrations of power. For example, in this morning’s lesson we are told that “in the morning when it was still very dark, he got up and went to a deserted place.” The disciples whom he had searched out in the light and had called, now had to go searching for him in the dark, wondering where he went.

Now, the reason that Jesus keeps slipping away like this, and all the Gospels report that he did so, is simply that he goes to pray. At first, that, of course, seems utterly appropriate. Jesus is the one we think of when we think of somebody being religious, and religious people do, of course, pray. So if anybody were to pray, it would stand to reason that it would be Jesus. And yet, we might be puzzled if we ever stopped to wonder what he prayed about, and why exactly he prayed. What could he be asking for? He already has God’s power, he has demonstrated that

God's authority is his. In fact, as we confess each Sunday, he is God. He can turn stones into bread, he can heal the sick, and cast out demons. So, it wouldn't seem that he would have to pray for those things, and certainly not in the way that we have to ask for those things. And, since he is sinless, it would appear that prayers of confession would be out of place, too. So what exactly does he need to pray for? What is he doing out there in the dark away from everybody else? He seems to know all and to be able to do all. It would seem he ought to be elsewhere continuing to change the world.

Yet, Son of God that he is, he is still a human being just like us. As St. Paul put it, "he did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." It was as a human being, and not as a god, that Jesus lived and that Jesus died. What, therefore, Jesus did was what any human being can do — not by nature, of course, but by God's grace and presence. As a man, Jesus had no special supernatural powers that were not open somehow to other men and women; there was only God's power. In fact, even though he cast out demons and healed the sick, there are no miracles that he did that are not also later ascribed to his followers. If he was resurrected, well, it was God's power that resurrected him, but resurrected him as the first-born from the dead, for all who live in him will find the same resurrection. And that, of course, is the whole point of the kingdom of God. It was a regime change, not just a quick appearance to dazzle everybody. It was the kingdom of God because God's power is now fully present and dwells within human life.

So Jesus for all the authority he presented only did what a human being by God's grace can do. But if he did only what a human can do he also did it *as* a human must do it — that is, by waiting on God, and waiting for God's grace.

Here is the reason why he keeps slipping away in the night to go to dark and lonely places. He goes out to pray, and in praying he is waiting on God's will, just as we must. It is in that waiting of prayer that he received God's power and authority. He did not get it from the crowd, who, at least in the early days, would have been willing to give him power over them and who would have been willing to lend him the power of the mob to do whatever he wanted. He did not get it from any especially keen insight into nature that gave him mastery over it, either; after all, he had not had a scientific education. He got it purely and simply from God, by waiting on God to give it, to give it by God's own grace and in God's own time and for God's own reasons. In that waiting, he received power and authority.

Isaiah had prophesied, "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." "For God alone," Isaiah says, "does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless." In becoming human, the Son of God accepted the human condition of being faint and powerless, and willed to exercise no power that was not God's, to have no will to power that was not God's will. And in waiting as a human must wait, he also taught us the way to know God and the way by which God's power and glory does dwell among us, the way that God's kingdom comes to us.

Now, the important point to recognize here that Jesus teaches his disciples is that waiting on God's will is the very essence of prayer, and that prayer is the very essence of Christian spiritual life, and the very key to the kingdom. Perhaps that value of prayer may seem obvious to us. But, even if we know why prayer is valuable, it is not always so clear that we know what we are doing in prayer. Often, I suspect, in prayer we are doing anything but waiting on God.

Clearly there are a lot of people who don't know how to pray. In the Sermon on the

Mount, for example, Jesus pointed out that the Gentiles pray with many words, by heaping up empty phrases, thinking that in those many words they can convince God of something or other. We are not always different; we frequently think to inform God of things, and not only inform God but give God the proper spin on things. Yet, God knows what we need before we ask, and certainly knows better than we do what exactly it is that we do need. The many words of the Gentiles therefore are not designed to let us wait on God and find out from God what we need – which is God, of course. They are actually the result of a certain impatience, for they are an attempt to overpower God and bend God’s will to our will, hoping that prayer will be like some magic talisman that will get us what we want when we cannot get it any other way.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, who are also a model of a way *not* to pray, Jesus points out, they also do not wait on God or anything else. What they want out of prayer is that they be seen as religious. Prayer for them is a show exercise, and is undertaken strictly in their own self interest. It is meant to increase their own power and esteem by receiving the admiration of the people who regard them as awesome and holy. They do, therefore, I suppose get a certain kind of power from their prayers, the power of the mob, but if they do, it is the very power that Jesus rejected and that he bid his disciples to reject, too.

But if not in these ways, how, then, does one pray? The key is the one Isaiah gives: in prayer one simply waits, and in waiting, listens, so that in listening God’s Word may fill us and become our word. Real prayer is prayer that is inward, prayer that empties us of all thoughts of ourselves and that then waits for God to remake us. The point is not as abstract or novel as it may seem, for Christians through the ages have prayed this way, and have developed ways to pray like this. In the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, divine reading, for example, one simply takes a brief passage of Scripture, God’s Word, and reads it out loud slowly, listening to what it says, and then

letting a single word, phrase, or image capture the imagination. One then reads it again out loud, again letting a word or image capture the imagination – it may well be the same one, and then silently meditating on that word, phrase or image until a prayer, often no more than a single sentence, is forced from the lips that says out loud what God would have us do now that we have listened to what he has to say to us.

In other similar forms of prayer, such as what is called centering prayer, one simply pays attention to a single name of God, and lets no other thought that flits through our minds dwell there for so long that it would keep us from paying attention. In both forms of prayer, the point really is to listen, and to learn how to listen, and for once to quit talking and informing God of what God already knows. And I will point out, it is really quite astounding how much of a regime change praying like this can affect in our lives, since it does drive out all sorts of personal demons. It drives out, for example, those gnawing little thoughts that take over all other thoughts and that then quickly turn into obsessions and possessions. It lets us find rest simply in the Word of the one who made and sustains us in love.

So Jesus waited upon God as a human must wait. And in that waiting as a human he also taught us men and women the way to know God and the way by which God's power and glory does dwell among us, the way that God's kingdom comes to us.

Now, waiting is not always something we easily do, especially silent meditative waiting. For example, in the present hurried culture of information technology, if we read, we tend to read strictly for information and knowledge since information and knowledge is power, and possessing information we possess power. So we read quickly to get what we need, and we therefore treat what we read in the way that consumers treat economic goods. We pick and choose what suits us and our desires, using what we want the way we want, and discarding the

rest. Rarely do we read in such a way that we expect to be changed in new and surprising ways by what we read. We want no more surprise out of our reading than the emotional tickle of being entertained in those times we read for pleasure.

Nor are we particularly comfortable with silence, either. In many households televisions and radios or stereos are constantly on precisely so that we never have to feel ourselves alone, a thought we hate. No sooner are we in the car than the radio goes on. We turn on our computers and surf the net and think that we are actually communicating with others, a part of a virtual community. In crowds, we plug in the earphones of iPods and listen to our music; we message with Blackberries, and never spend but a moment looking at what is around us. Yet from all that information and knowledge overload, all that virtual reality, how much wiser have we become? How much communication really goes on? How much community have we actually formed?

Perhaps this is preaching to the choir. I suspect most of you do know the answers to those questions, and really have done your best to listen in another way than those ways provide. That you have surely is what has brought you here, seeking real community among real people and seeking a much more powerful word to listen for.

Still, even among religious people, waiting is not always easy. Indeed, often people of faith do not find it easy to wait. This is because of reasons peculiar to religion itself, reasons that constitute a serious temptation within faith. For the temptation that people of faith often face is that having faith they actually do have some ideals, ideals such as a sense of justice, purity, truth, and righteousness that is something more than just pragmatic. To have faith is to have listened at least once and to have had these ideals rise up in us and grip our souls as a result of that listening. As people of faith, we realize that these things are not only important, we also realize that these things are all important. That has given us a certain power over our lives and a certain freedom in

life that we fully confess do not come from us. These ideals also give us a certain energy and enthusiasm when we think on them, energy and enthusiasm that has come from waiting and listening. Now, the temptation is this: that once these ideals rise up in us, the very enthusiasm we have for them can be precisely what makes us impatient and makes us stop waiting and listening anymore. We become *impatient* to push these ideals, and we become anxious that we and the world will fall short of them. So we can't wait any longer, we no longer listen and when that happens, we, instead of God, take charge of them. Sometimes that makes us self-righteous. It is, I dare say, where religion and wars get their unfortunate connection. Having gotten on the right side and gotten onto the right ideas we think we, and not God, have the authority to make them real. Well, of course, these ideals should be made real in human life. No one who loves justice and mercy ought to accept injustice and cruelty. But if the kingdom is to come near us, and not to one simply be of our own making, then these things need to be realized in the world in the same way that they first dawned in us, that is, by quietly waiting and listening. Often in the midst of righteous enthusiasm and in the parade of power, the best thing to do, the most essential thing to do, is to get up early and slip away in the night.

Jesus came to change the world. That is a powerful thing and an astounding mission. As the psalmist says, "Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord of all the earth." We are part of that mission. But to fulfill our part, to help change the world, we need to follow the way he changed it – and changes us. For his power to change the world came in his patience and his waiting upon the will of God; our ability to be changed and to change also comes in waiting. May God therefore now give us this power to wait and to listen, this power of patience, and in doing so may our lives be changed and may the world be changed.