

What “waiting for the Lord” is all about

A sermon for the third Sunday in Lent

We have seen in the book of Isaiah that the most significant statement of the problem of sin is disobedience. And secondly, we have seen that this Lord, who is Lord of lords and King of kings, works through the Word. Now we come to the question: Where is he working, and how do we involve ourselves with that?

If you have a map of the Fertile Crescent, you can see that fertile stretch of land which goes from Egypt through Palestine and then over to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where we today have what is called Iraq. And this is important for two reasons. First of all, you see the two stretches of fertile land and second, you see the narrowing or bottleneck between them. You can see the vast desert which is very inhospitable. You might go across with a camel caravan but not with an army. But you go through Palestine, and there at the level of the lower part of the Sea of Galilee is a city called Megiddo. It is at the head of a mountain pass and armies coming from Egypt north or from Assyria or Babylonia south have to go through there. That is important in the history of Israel, and for how they understood God to be working.

You recall that they were given the great promise that in Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed, and that they would be a great nation. However that future seemed to go wrong so they went to Egypt for refuge because of a famine, and after 400 years they were slaves. But Moses came and they were freed from slavery and delivered to the Promised Land.

Then over a period again of about 400 years they were guided and led by judges and prophets. This, too, was not very successful because these judges rose up because the people had gone wrong. There were fourteen to sixteen judges in all. The people kept disobeying and falling into idolatry. Then another judge would rise up, and that was one way of being led.

Finally about 1100 B.C., the people said: “We want a king!” So they received first of all Saul and that did not go well, and about 1040 or 1020 David ruled. And this was the largest extent of the kingdom of Israel, but it was important to realize that this was at a time when the two other poles of the Fertile Crescent were weak.

So even though this Davidic kingdom was large, it was not huge. That was as large as they ever grew. But they continually tried to ally themselves with Egypt or with Assyria, and then back and forth, and it did not work out well.

In 721 Assyria came and stripped the city, and ten tribes of Israel disappeared. The remaining two fumbled and stumbled again playing one side off against the other. Nineveh was overcome by the Babylonians and the Medes in 605 in one of the ten most decisive battles of history. At Carchemish, the Babylonians succeeded in destroying the Assyrians because the Egyptians were delayed at Megiddo by the Israelites and their king, Josiah, died in the process.

The Egyptians came too late to rescue the Assyrians, and then Babylon took over. Then in 587, or about then, there was a conflict and Jerusalem was leveled and the remaining two tribes were taken into captivity. In 539 or 538 Persia came and gave them some kind of chance to go back. It was not much.

We must remember that it was not some sort of triumphal return but some of them went back and tried to set up some walls and then the temple under Nehemiah and Ezra about 450 B.C.

What had happened to the promise? They had been promised that they would be a great nation, and they thought that it was starting to really happen under David, but as you know, the first ten tribes went and then the last two, and there was very little left. What did it mean that there would be this Anointed One who would be the King (David or the follower of David), and that would be the center of their worship and their political life?

The ancient Israelites reflected on all this with a certain kind of astonishing concern which we see in Isaiah 50:10: "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?" The Israelites were to be the light to the Gentiles and the Lord would bring light. But there was no light. And that is astonishing. What do you have to go on?

This is reaffirmed by other verses, such as Isaiah 45:15: "Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself."

And it is not only in Isaiah, but also in Proverbs and Psalms. For example, Psalm 37:1, 3: "Fret not yourself because of the wicked, be not envious of wrongdoers!... Commit your ways to the Lord; trust in him and **he will act.**" Their stance is: We just have to **let the Lord do it**, and that is it.

We see this in a different way in Isaiah 10:5: "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury!" says the Lord. Isaiah 45:1: "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus." And then in Jeremiah who was just after the fall or during the time of the fall in 587, Jeremiah 43:10: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant." All these tyrants, these terrible dictators, are nevertheless the Lord's working. How do we understand this, and how can we make sense of this?

What the Israelites did is go back to the great central act of the Exodus. Because the Lord freed us from slavery, this is how the Lord works. This is how he **worked** in the past, how he **is working** now, and this is how he **will work** in the future. What we see here is the emphasis on the God who acts. He comes to save, and his ways are beyond our comprehension. We simply know he is the one who saves, his way.

On the basis of that, our job is "to wait for the Lord." Isaiah 64:4: "No eye has seen a God besides thee, who works for those who wait for him."

In the army there is a saying that the soldier's job is "to hurry up and wait." In the Benedictine tradition the follower's way is to "pray and work."

Here in Isaiah and elsewhere the believer is to **wait for the Lord**. Isaiah 40:32: "They 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." Isaiah 30:18: "For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him."

How does this work? Even then the Israelites struggled to figure out how the Lord works, and what they should do. Some thought: It is up to us to make it happen. This is seen in a remarkable passage in Isaiah 30:15-16 where the Lord says: "'In returning and rest shall be you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.' And you would not, but you said, 'No! We will speed upon horses,'

therefore you shall speed away..." It goes on in a very ironic way to say: OK, if you are going to make it happen on your own and think you can, have at it. But that will be a problem.

The Lord does things his way. It is not that the Lord gives us a kick start, and then it is up to us to do the rest. There is a misguided saying that the Lord has no hands but ours. But that is not true.

In Matthew 3:9 Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees, and they say: Well, we are the sons of Abraham. And the answer comes the Lord can create sons of Abraham out of these stones. And the point is that you do not have a hold on God or a claim on God such that he depends on you. He will do things his way.

Does that mean that we should sit on our hands and do nothing? There is a verse in Psalm 35:20, where it says there are the quiet in the land, those who sort of sit there on their hands and wait for the Lord because believers are not supposed to do anything. Well does that mean that? What does the Lord expect from us? After all he is Lord and brings about things his way, beyond our comprehension. In the Old Testament there is no real answer, and we then have in the New Testament something that is fulfillment that they did not foresee then.

It helps here to go to Martin Luther. Like these people in Isaiah, or like Paul, Martin Luther knew the end of this world could come at any time. "But of that day or that hour no one knows" (Mark 13:32). The Lord will do it in his time and his way. His future kingdom is totally a kingdom of grace. There is nothing we can do to bring in or break into this kingdom.

What did Luther do when he thought the end was near? He got married! Now of all the ways to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God that is certainly not one which would occur to most. He didn't hurry off to church, to a monastery, or to perform some spiritual act to impress God. He got married. Why? Because, he reasoned, if God is coming, then **we, his people, ought to be found living as God intended us to live on this earth.** We ought to be found taking care of this world as God intended – not acting as if we are some minor league gods. The gospel, the promise of God's coming kingdom, redirected Luther back into the world. As he said his marriage would make the angels laugh and the devils weep.

Note the direction Luther moves. At the time you would expect him to be going in the opposite direction – from the secular to the sacred, from this world to the next, he, in fact, moves more into this world. This is the reason for the story often attributed to Luther that if he knew the world was to end tomorrow he would go out into his garden and plant a tree. For the idea is that when God comes, **we ought to be found doing what God intended us to do – taking care of "the garden."**

Luther did not become a new Moses. He never donned the mantle of a theocrat making militant disciples for the Last Days. He was not a kingdom builder. He did not even have a blueprint for the problems of his day. He faced problems practically with the best wisdom he could muster.

In light of the Lord's future kingdom on the horizon, his people here and now are free to be about their business as human beings. Prince and peasant, businessmen, engineers, artists, cooks, soldiers, students, and all – are free to be about their proper business in this world with the best wisdom and common sense they can muster.

Because the end was coming, Luther married and raised a family, six children in all. He deeply loved his wife and children. At the same time, he did **not live for** his marriage and family.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7: “The appointed time has grown very short. Let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as if they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as if they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away” (vs 29-31). This world is passing away.

And we are “**in but not of**” the world. As Paul writes in Philippians 3:20: “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Because our citizenship is in heaven, we are free here and now to be about our business as human beings.

This stance of having eyes on the coming kingdom is expressed most beautifully in the most Jewish book of the New Testament, the book of Hebrews, chapter 13:14: “For here we have no abiding city, but we look to the city which is to come.”

We live with eyes on the kingdom to come. And use our voices to spread the good news that God in Christ died for you and me. His kingdom is coming. In his kingdom of grace and life there is no more sin and death, no more mourning, and no more tears.

It really put best by Paul in Romans 8:38-39, in those beautiful verses which sum up the whole of his thinking and express what the Isaiah passages on **waiting for the Lord** are all about: “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

To that we say, Amen.