

## *Awaiting God's Promise*

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Luke 13: 31-35

A woman sees a father shopping with a fussy two-year-old in his grocery cart. "Be patient, Billy," he whispers. "You can handle this, Billy. It's okay, Billy."

The woman said to him, "I don't mean to interrupt your shopping, but I just had to tell you how wonderfully loving and patient you are with little Billy."

The man replied, "Actually, my son's name is Patrick. **My** name is Billy."

Patience may be a virtue, but it's also a blessing from God. Whether it's waiting in the checkout line, waiting in the ER, waiting in the doctor's office, waiting on hold listening to brittle, brutal Muzak, or waiting for the water to boil, all that waiting requires patience.

But patience can run into short supply. We have expectations that things are going to happen. And we wait. And nothing happens. We draw down our reserves of patience, and still nothing happens. Irritation creeps into our spirit and the pressure starts to build.

Organizations who utilize phone messaging systems have tried to figure out how to make the experience of waiting less of an irritant for their clients. In the end, it seems like they've devised ways to make their clients stay on hold even longer. A minute or two used to be customary.

Then they started with music, or really Muzak, the corporate version of creating bad music. The chiming-in of Muzak came to signal the beginning of a long wait, only now listening to really bad music, or obnoxious noise, whatever you'd prefer to call it.

Then came the periodic interruption of a recorded, rather disembodied human voice who apologized for the wait, explained that there was increased call volume, and told you how you are such a valued customer.

The latest is the robotic voice who tells you what your place is in the queue, or it may tell you your wait time: "You are **third** in line; your wait time is approximately **seven** minutes." By the time it gets to saying, "you are **next** in line; your wait time is approximately **three** minutes," you realize that you've been on the phone for over 15 minutes and the robot obviously uses a different time mechanism from the rest of us.

Then a rep comes on the line, introduces themselves, asks you five questions which you had already answered in the call screening 20 minutes ago, and asks what they can do for you. When you explain you have a problem with your bill, the line suddenly returns to dial tone because the weasel has cut you off. Since they can't sell you anything and make money from you, they couldn't be bothered, and apparently don't think that internal controls will catch them, and they're probably right.

We wait and wait, expecting that the time will come when our longings and desires are satisfied. However, the longer that satisfaction gets delayed, the more likely we are to believe that the longed-for satisfaction will never come.

God is always asking his people to wait, to be patient, to await the time of the proper season. That season doesn't typically refer to a natural season, but rather to 'the season of *God's choosing*,' whenever that might be. And then it seems justifiable to start to wonder....

Again, we await the time of our satisfaction, anticipating that our expectations will be fulfilled. We think as if our expectations define the future, as if our longing to be satisfied is actually God's plan for us. As experience teaches us, God has different ideas. Indeed, God's plan and how it works out tend to be terribly at odds with our schedule and our expectations. Our scriptures reveal the jarring nature of that experience, but they also teach us how faithful folks actually stay faithful.

Abram was promised an heir. It's been several chapters now – a long, long time – and still no heir. And, Abram and Sarah aren't getting any younger. The proverbial biological clock has likely stopped ticking. Here God, the Promise-maker, has come to speak with his servant Abram.

God says in the vision, "Do not fear, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." Well, Abram shows no sign of fear and frankly he doesn't seem to be thinking much of this "very, great reward" comment.

In fact, the English translation covers up the hostility in Abram's reply to God. Far from fearful, Abram is **indignant**. "Very great reward"? Listen to what he says. 'What can **you** give me? I have no heir. Eliezer, a *servant* in my household, stands to gain my inheritance. **You've** given me no children!'

God takes this in stride and reaffirms his promise. Showing him the star-filled sky, God tries to paint a picture to Abram, quite an incredible picture for this childless, aging man.

The only thing more incredible than this amazing image of descendants beyond counting – like stars in the sky – is Abram's response. Having been incensed at God's apparent inability to deliver on his promise of an heir, we would expect something rather sharp and nasty in response. Instead it says, "Abram believed the Lord." Abram believed God. He **trusted** God to work out the fulfillment of the promise. For that trust, that faith, the text says, "He credited to him as righteousness."

*This* definition of righteousness attached to a creature, a mortal, is **unique** in scripture. It reveals the **sacred** nature of Abram's response to the challenge and promise of being faithful to God when evidence suggests that this would be unwise. Abram has renounced his demands, set aside his claims on God, made himself vulnerable to be taken advantage of. Abram submitted in faithfulness and humility

before the sovereignty of God, accepting God's reaffirmation of the promise of an heir. **This is righteousness in the faithful servant that waits upon the Lord, and trusts in his counsel and his providence.** This is our lesson.

There is more to the story. God reaffirms another promise for Abram regarding land. Abram may be righteous, but he hasn't lost his tongue. He asks God, 'How do I **know** I'll get this land?' Then God responds with the instructions and actions around the sacrificial offering, something hard to fathom, likely drawing on ancient custom and imagery. At least we might say that the flame passing among the pieces reflects God's abiding, active presence among his people that enables the fulfillment of the promise; God is the flame passing between and among those who offer themselves to God in fulfillment of his promise.

Abram has a long way to go before he witnesses the fulfillment of the promise. And there are times when he *thinks* he's got it, only to find out that he hasn't. Instead he learns that God is *still* working things through. The faithful are pushed in their patience, in their waiting, reminded all along just who God is and who they are in this relationship.

As we face times of waiting, anxiously expectant, we wait upon the acts and will of our sovereign God. Our belief that it should be done *by now*, it should have happened *by now*, that we should be through this *by now*, that we should be in a different place or position *by now*, is just **our** expectation.

We can say two things. First, like Abraham, we're called to trust in what God will do, in what God has promised. It's unfaithful to impose our timetables, to complain that our plans are not working out, and to ultimately charge God as **un**faithful. In fact, **we** would be the unfaithful ones then. God's promise *is* coming, just not fast enough for us.

Second, I find that God uses these interim times to teach us, walk with us, challenge us, show us new things, revealing himself and the importance of our spiritual relationship, anchored in trust of his grace, providence and care. There can be a blessing in delayed fulfillment that grows us into the promise of our God, if we trust that his promise is truly for us.

In Luke, Jesus gets a warning from some sympathetic Pharisees (see, Pharisees aren't all bad folks). You see, Jesus is on Herod's hit list. This active and imminent threat from the King doesn't faze Jesus at all. His defiant response shows his confidence in his sacred mission from God, his deep faithfulness, his complete righteousness.

Jesus mocks the threat, saying, "For surely no prophet can die **outside** Jerusalem!" The worldly powers working toward Jesus' destruction are no different from the powers that persecuted God's prophets in the past. It's the same evil that's working through different faces in different times.

Then Jesus bemoans the lost promise of Jerusalem. The covenant made with Abraham was not vacated by God, but by the sin of the people, failing in the righteous bearing of Abraham before his God. The arrogance of the powers within Jerusalem that seek to control God and his promise are voiding the opportunity for God's grace and blessing. "Look," says Jesus, "your house is left to you desolate." "Left to you" as if an inheritance, a worthless bequest. The promise given to Abraham has come, but God's people could not abide within that promise of trust and fidelity. Now the house, the cherished temple, the sacred precincts that were to honor God and God's righteousness, together with the land of the ancient promise, are being made a wasteland. The house and the land are serving the world and its powers, not God, the Promise-giver who kept his promise.

There is a burden in waiting on the Lord, for the fulfillment of his time, his promise, his way. In waiting, we may get frustrated and impatient, doubting the promise of the Promise-giver. In waiting, we may learn to renounce our demands for control and authority, finding humility and professing faith in God as sovereign over all. We might turn to model Abram as the Promise-bearer and be instructed in his righteousness.

Truly, the promise that opens itself to us is often just a beginning. Isn't there always more, often far more than we can imagine? For the faithful, this more-than-we-can-imagine is the good news of the promise being fulfilled, of amazing abundance and untold blessing.

For those who cannot wait upon the Lord, it is abundant frustration, painful betrayal, and a sad disappointment that fails and falls before the demands of humility and trust in the Lord.

And the promise that presents itself can vanish from us when we lose the sacred sight of a faithful perspective and attitude. We can disconnect ourselves from righteousness and fall into the trap of demanding, expecting, and even commanding the promise out of God. All we do is order ourselves into sinful unrighteousness and make desolate our place in the promise of God.

Use this season to renew bonds of faithfulness. Use this season to wait upon the Lord. Let him speak to our humble hearts of sacred things. Let his promise for us blossom and grow in new directions. May we learn the righteousness of ancient forebears and prophets who served the Lord our God with humility and with faithfulness, who waited upon the Lord, who trusted in him always.