

“Not Now?”
Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
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Rev. Glen Bell

Not now? Not now?

Those are two of the hardest words – not now. We wait and yearn and ache for “now” to come. It’s right there in Isaiah. “O God, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” You came down way back then, when you did those awesome deeds we did not expect, and the mountains trembled. That’s what we want, God – now! We want you to make your name known to all your adversaries. We want your glory to flash across the heavens, that everyone may see your mercy and justice and power and goodness.

But, no. It is not happening now. It feels, O God – well, it feels like you have hidden your face from us.

We wait for the now, the now announced right there in Mark’s Gospel. “In those days,” the Bible proclaims, “they will see Jesus, the Son of Man, coming with power and glory.” God will gather the chosen from north and south and east and west.

But this is not the time. It is not now. Instead, you and I are left with waiting, with an invitation to persistence and patience.

So: What do we do as we wait? Who are we? And who do we become?

It was sort of a rotten day on that occasion over 150 years ago. As one commentator notes, “Weeks of wet weather had caused Pennsylvania Avenue to become a sea of mud and standing water. The thousands of spectators stood in thick mud at the capitol grounds to hear the president be sworn in for this second term. The chief justice administered the oath of office, and then President Abraham Lincoln began to speak. “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on . . . to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan, to do all [we can to achieve] a just and lasting peace . . . “

President Lincoln had waited years for victory, years for the Union to be preserved. And now he set himself and the nation on an even harder course, to wait with charity and determination for healing, for reconciliation, for a just and lasting peace.

He knew, even though it seemed impossible, that it was the only goal worth waiting for.

He knew, even if it took decades, that this quest would call us to our better selves.

So you and I wait, with persistence and patience, with charity and determination. We wait because in the waiting we become who we are created to be, children of God, forgiven, healed, mature.

It was hard for Lincoln, because it was a work far beyond his lifetime.

It is hard for us, because we want results. We want the now immediately. We want that day to come this very instant. But about the coming and scheduling of that day or hour, no one knows, not even Jesus, only God the Father. So the refrain is repeated over and over again: keep alert, keep awake, keep awake.

Keep alert, for you do not know. Keep awake, for you do not know. Keep awake.

It is disappointing and difficult, but here’s the truth: we don’t always know much. We don’t know when the time will arrive. We don’t know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. We don’t know when God will tear open the heavens and come down.

But we do know the most important thing. We know our direction. We know our orientation. We know the One on whom we are setting our hopes.

Father Greg Boyle is a Roman Catholic priest, famous for his work to help gang members in Los Angeles. The program he leads employs former gang members in a variety of businesses.

“Love is all there is,” he writes, “and love is all you are. And you want people to recognize the truth of who they are. . . . Alice Miller, the late, great child psychologist, said we are all called to be enlightened witnesses: people who through kindness and tenderness and the focused attention of love return people to themselves. And in the process, you are returned to yourself.

“I have a homie named Louie,” he explains. “He’s just turned 18, and he’s kind of a difficult kid. He’s exasperating, and he’s whiny. He works for me, although ‘work’ may be too strong a verb. But homies lately have asked me for blessings, which is odd. They never say, ‘Father, may I have your blessing?’ They always say, ‘Hey, G, give me a bless, yeah?’

“So this kid, Louie, I’m talking to him, and he’s complaining about something. And finally, at the end of it, he says, ‘Hey, G, give me a bless, yeah?’ I said, ‘Sure.’ So he comes around to my side of the desk. He knows the drill; he bows his head. I put my hand on his shoulder.

“I said, ‘You know, Louie, I’m proud to know you. My life is richer because you came into it. When you were born, this world became a better place. And I’m proud to call you my son, even though’ – and I don’t know why I decided to add this part – ‘at times you can really be a huge pain in the butt.’

“And Louie looks up, and he smiles. And he says, ‘The feeling’s mutual.’”

When we wait and hope and give and share, when we wait and serve and forgive and grow, we are returning people to themselves. And this waiting is returning us to ourselves.

This waiting is worth our lives. This waiting is our life’s work. It is redemptive and salvific. It is all about recovery and reclamation. It is the most beautiful part of our souls’ experience, even though we sometimes can’t recognize it.

Abraham Lincoln and Greg Boyle are inviting us to see right now through a greater lens, to understand waiting as our spiritual formation and character development. If we see “right now” that way, then “right now” – even when boring or bothersome – it becomes the most important moment.

One other story from Father Greg Boyle. He points back to the desert fathers and mothers, those spiritual leaders in the early history of the church who would go out into the wilderness to meditate on scripture and be with God. “Whenever the desert fathers and mothers would get absolutely despondent,” he says, “whenever they didn’t know how they were going to put one foot in front of the next, they had this mantra. And the mantra wasn’t ‘God,’ and the word wasn’t ‘Jesus.’ The word was ‘today.’ Today.

“That’s sort of the key” he concludes. “There’s a play off-Broadway right now called *Now. Here. This*. That’s become my mantra. When I’m walking, or before a kid comes into my office, I always say, ‘Now. Here. This.’ so that I’ll be present and right here with the person in front of me.”

Sisters and brothers, I fail at this regularly. I’m thinking far too often about the hospital visit I need to make, or the bereaved mother I need to talk to, or the appointment I have coming up. All the time I miss the opportunities right in front of me. I miss you. I miss me.

I miss the blessing of waiting – right now. I miss the blessing of this present moment – right now.

This reminds me of another Advent story. In the third chapter of Luke’s Gospel, John the Baptist is out preaching in the wilderness. “Prepare God’s way,” he announces. “Bear fruit with your lives.”

The people ask him, “What then should we do? How should we live?” And John responds, “Share what you have. Take no more than is yours. Treat everyone with respect and care and mercy.” Right now. Right here. Every moment. For every moment becomes precious as we wait. Every moment becomes precious as we see our lives through a greater lens.

Mark Tidworth is a coach for congregations and pastors, based in South Carolina. He says this: “Over the past 2-3 years, I’ve started slipping one particular exercise into as many presentations as possible. It leads to holy moments. At the right time, when people are ready, I ask them what they know.

“What do you know about God? And God’s ways with human beings? Not what your systematic theology tells you. Not what you believe you ought to know. Not what your peers expect you to say. But what do you know deep in your bones, when you are scared in the middle of the night, when you run out of options? What do you know that empowers you to move forward?”

I asked our elders this question at our session meeting last Tuesday. Here’s how they answered. “I know God is there.” “I know God is a good listener.” “I know God is unconditional love.” “I know God has a plan.” “I know God is our protector.” “I know God is amazingly persistent.” “I know God always answers.” “I know God is more patient than I.”

We know God. And that makes all the difference.

So sisters and brothers, keep awake. Live in the now. Cherish this moment. Look for Jesus.