



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Waiting”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Psalm 37: 1-9; Isaiah 64: 1-9

December 3, 2017

You know, sometimes God seems to write the sermon for me!

It's been one of those weeks. We all know it's a busy time of year in life, and certainly in the life of the church – and that played out throughout this past week. But, this week, it's been more than that.

- As a staff we walked side by side with Kerrin in the days that followed her father's passing.
- As a church, many of us were painfully aware of the anniversary of the loss of Karl Schimpf, a year ago last Thursday.
- I sat in my office Monday night with the family of Dottie Searle preparing for her memorial next weekend.
- I stood in my office door for an over an hour, early in the week, listening as one of our members tearfully shared the struggles of their circumstances.
- I spent hours on Tuesday proofreading the Advent Devotionals in our booklet and gleaned the hope of the words but noted the unambiguous angst and struggle in which so many of those words were grounded.
- Then, I sat down to read some of the suggested Scriptures in the lectionary for today's services, and I was stopped in my tracks by the fifth verse of Isaiah 64.

“You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed!” It was that last line that so struck me. “Because you hid yourself we transgressed!”

They say patience is a virtue, but it's not an easy one. And, when it comes to this notion of waiting on God as the Psalmist writes in Psalm 37 – when it comes to this concept of waiting patiently for him – I think the reality of life just makes it that much harder. And, that's the circumstance that Isaiah is reflecting here. To the people of God who have been in exile from their homeland for years, the notion of waiting on God to make things right had worn thin – they felt God had hidden himself, so they were turning away!

- They were giving up on the notion of a Messiah who would deliver them.
- They were giving up on the hope of returning to their homeland.
- They were giving up on the very idea of being able to restore their lives to what they had been before.
- They were giving up on God.

It had just been too long – their patience in waiting on God had run out – and they were giving up. That’s the circumstance that Isaiah is reflecting in his prayer. But, the key note is the ninth verse. “Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.” Isaiah’s prayer in the midst of the Israelites giving up on God is, in its simplest form, that God not give up on them!

It’s the same story you may recall from Exodus – when Moses descends from his mountaintop conversation with God to find Aaron and the Israelites melting gold and forming gods of their own. After decades of wandering their patience had run thin and they were tired of waiting on God. So, they took it into their own hands. But, Moses’ prayer to God was the same – “Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.” In other words, ‘They may have given up on you, God, but don’t give up on them!’

And, you know what? He didn’t. It wasn’t in their time, it wasn’t in their way, and it wasn’t by their design – but God never gave up on them and God faithfully fulfilled his promises.

- The Israelites did cross Jordan into the Promised Land.
- The people of Israel were restored to their homeland in Judah and the second temple was built.
- The Messiah who is Christ, our King, was born to bring hope, peace, love, joy, light and salvation to all of God’s people then, today, and forever!

The truth with which I found myself bombarded, this week, is that life can make it hard to wait on God!

- In our homes we struggle with broken relationships, the loss of loved ones, job loses, financial stresses, dependencies and addictions and hundreds of other daily stresses...
- In our communities we see reports of robberies, car-jackings, shootings and countless other reflections of a broken society...
- In our country we watch as mass shootings, cars driven into large crowds and a seemingly endless stream of mindless and pointless violence takes the lives of innocent people...
- In our world we see geo-political tensions rising, missiles firing, oppressed people dying, children starving and what seems to be an endless barrage of pain and suffering...

...and, times arise in the midst of all of this in which we find that our patience is wearing thin. ‘Where is God?’ We wonder. ‘Why isn’t God doing something?’ We ask. ‘Is God even hearing us? Does God even care? Is God even there?’

It’s understandable. It’s human nature. It’s not a new thing that we struggle to wait on God, and it’s not a new thing that we face temptation to give up on God. That seems to be a constant in humanity’s relationship with God. The world has strife, the people of God struggle, and the

people of God sometimes run low on their patience to wait on God. That's not a new narrative in the story of God – and if there are people here this morning who are in that place in any way, you are not the first and you won't be the last.

But, there is another constant in humanity's relationship with God. No matter how much people struggled, no matter how much they gave up on God, God never gave up on them! The answers may not have come in their time, in their way, or by their design – but they came, because God did hear, God did care, God was there all along!

The life we live can lead us to doubt and struggle with God at times. The barrage of iniquity, pain and suffering that we see can cause our patience to run thin. We may even, at times, reach that point of feeling as though we are ready to give up on God. The story towards which we look throughout this season, however, is the pinnacle evidence of the truth that his promises are ours forever. The birth of the Christ-child in which rejoice on Christmas Eve is the ever-present reminder that, no matter how close we may ever come to giving up on God, he never has, and never will, give up on us.