

Sermon Draft for Randy Priem, December 31, 2023

Text: Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Sermon: “Waiting”

Seventy years ago, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett wrote a play that is considered a modern masterpiece by people all over the world. The play is about two men who are waiting under a tree for a man called Godot. The two men are unsure of exactly who Godot is or if he will ever arrive. They talk at length, searching for hope and making meaningless conversation as they wait, never sure exactly what they are hoping for or what will happen when Godot shows up. As the play comes to an end, night falls on the helpless and unfulfilled men, and the man they wait for never comes. In this play, entitled *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett assumes the role of mouthpiece for the entire unbelieving world, accusing Christians of spending their lives waiting on impotent promises made by a nonexistent God.

A close look at Scripture reveals that Beckett was at least partially right. For practically all of history, mankind has waited for God. Indeed, we have waited for God to save us. Our English Bible has sixty-six books consisting of about twelve hundred pages.

Mankind was sinless and in favor with God for exactly two chapters, which equates to roughly a page and a half. We all know what happened in that third chapter of Genesis. Our ancestors Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and in doing so, they plunged themselves and all of God's creation into a condition of sin. The world and everything in it was separated from God.

God was angry and cast our first parents out of the garden. He cursed them with difficulties and tribulation and, finally, death. We see from the beginning that God despises rebellion against him, but we also see that God's wrath is overshadowed by his grace. For even as God was expelling his wicked children from paradise, he promised them that one of Eve's offspring would crush the head of the reviled serpent that tempted them into their fatal mistake. Yes, even in the third chapter of Genesis, God promises a Messiah. From that point on, mankind has waited for God.

Unfortunately, rarely have we waited well. God's wisdom has always seemed foolish to humans, so we've always sought to have things our own way.

Throughout history, whenever man's will led him to misery, suffering, and despair (as was always the case), helpless man cried out to God and waited for God to save him again. Without fail, God always did.

The entire Old Testament, in ways both subtle and bold, points to both the need for and the promise of a Savior. Whether through events that foreshadowed the salvation that was to come, or by bold prophetic utterances of those who spoke on God's behalf, every book of the Old Testament told of man's desperate inability to save himself and of God's enduring promise to save and restore him. God promised to send a Messiah, a champion of his people, who would crush their oppressors, lead them to the promised land, and restore their relationship with him. And so, man waited.

God in his mercy did not force his children to linger here on earth without him. Our heavenly Father knew that the burden of enduring without him was too much for his children to bear, so God always placed himself where his broken children could easily find him. He told them to build a tabernacle, which means "dwelling place," where they could come and hear God's Word read to them.

They were to come to him in repentance and sacrifice the blood of animals for their sins. They were to come and receive forgiveness and comfort. They were to come and be in the real presence of God. God was always there, just as he said he would be.

Over generations, God's people continued to be so sinful and so rebellious that the blood of beasts could never satisfy God's wrath. Despite God's presence, guidance, and mercy, man still wanted his own way. And so, God gave it to him. God spoke to the people through prophets, telling them of his fury over their sin. Through Isaiah, for example, God warned his people of the day when all they had would ***“be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left,”*** said the Lord (Isaiah 39:6). And, yes, he allowed them to be taken into the bondage of slavery again.

True to form, however, God still spoke words of promise. He assured his people that the Messiah would yet come to them at just the right time. Even as Isaiah saw the days of captivity, God let him see deliverance, a new day:

“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God. . . . For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up. . . . For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God” (61:10a, 11; 62:1–3).

“Shall,” “will,” “until.” Promises, promises, Becketts of the Old Testament world would say. God’s people lamented, and they cried out for reconciliation. And they waited.

The story of Simeon as recorded in the second chapter of Luke may cover only a few paragraphs, but it has a great and lasting importance to the life of every Christian. Simeon, like many of his generation, had waited for God’s Messiah.

But unlike any other of his generation that we know of, he had been guaranteed by God that he would not die before he had seen the promise come to pass. Simeon waited well. We do not know how long, for although tradition usually portrays Simeon as greatly advanced in age, Scripture is silent as to how old he actually was. All that can be said is that he waited well in faith for his Savior to arrive. And just as God promised, the Messiah did come. God has always made his people promises and kept them.

The Scripture said that the Holy Spirit had come upon Simeon, and it is clear that this is how he knew that he had seen the Christ. For only through the eyes of faith that the Holy Spirit can provide could Simeon have known that this helpless, fragile baby was really the King of all creation. As he looked upon the child, born humbly and in a most inglorious fashion, he knew that he had not waited in vain on an impotent, nonexistent fantasy. He had in fact been in the real presence of God.

As Simeon looked at the child, Scripture records that he spoke these beautiful words that I'll bet you recognize from the liturgy as the Nunc Dimittis: *"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel"* (Luke 2:29–32 KJV).

The Samuel Becketts of Simeon's day would have dismissed this as sheer and utter foolishness, but our God works that way. His foolishness produces abundance from nothingness, strength from weakness, life from death. We see this at the cross. We see our Jesus battered, weak, and crucified, in despair and agony. Through worldly eyes, we see a gentle Jewish man being executed, but through eyes of faith provided us by the Holy Spirit, we see God incarnate, triumphantly destroying the power of death for us. We can never think about this reality too much. For at the cross, we learn who we truly are and who God truly is. God's attributes were fully revealed that day, as we beheld God's ultimate wrath and fury and his shocking and infinite mercy. Our sin so infuriated our heavenly Father that there had to be blood atonement.

Someone had to die! But he loves us so much that he wouldn't let it be us. Instead, in our place, he sent his only Son to be our Savior, just as he always said he would do.

We no longer wait for God to reconcile us to him, for that was finished at the cross. At our Baptism, we were washed, renewed, and grafted into the family, forever bonded to the One who conquered death, the devil, and hell on our behalf. We are no longer free agents left to our own devices and our own feeble plans to save ourselves. Our lives have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ, and we are his.

We still wait for God, but we wait differently now. We wait for his return. He has promised to come again for us and to take us to the place he has prepared for us in heaven. We now wait to see him face to face, knowing that we have nothing to fear in the real presence of God. We now look eagerly forward to the day when our tears are wiped away and our joy will be without restraint. We wait for our place at the table at a feast that will have no end.

There is also good news for us in the present. We do not merely wait for the presence of God in the future, for just as in the days of old, he knows that life on earth is too much for us to bear alone. Just as in the Old Testament, God still puts himself where we, his broken children, can easily find him. He has promised to meet us in his Supper, where he gives us the sacrifice he made at the cross so that we may have comfort from the forgiveness of our sins. Here he meets us, gives us his real presence, and assures us of his love. He will always be there for us, just as he's said he would.

As we wait for God now, we need not concern ourselves as some Christians do with trying to “show God our résumé” of all we have done and not done. Do not be obsessed with proving yourself to God so that you may impress him in the hopes of being saved on the Last Day. The truth is, you will be sinning when the Lord returns, and so will I. Rather, wait for God by remaining daily in repentance and remembering the depth of your sin and the greater depth of God's grace. Never forget that there is no sin we have committed that is too great to be absolved by his mercy. His death and resurrection are sufficient.

The world is full of Becketts who accuse us of waiting on a promise that is impotent and on a God who doesn't exist. But our God has a perfect attendance record. We don't know when he'll return. Rest assured, however, that when he's seen all he needs to see, and all that he requires has come to pass, he will say to the evil foe, "You will hurt my children no more." Our waiting will end, and he will return, just as he always said he would. Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.