

1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Psalm 25:1-10

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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## WAITING AT THE DOOR OF THE SOUL.

*"To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." Psalm 25:1*

... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. *1 Corinthians 1:7*

Waiting. Often it's not the most productive or engaging of times. Waiting for the pot to boil or the phone to ring. Waiting for the freedom you anticipate at the end of adolescence. Waiting for the mail to arrive, or spring to come, or the surgery to be over. Typically we wait for external events to make their move. This often characterizes Advent waiting—waiting for a distant thing to come to meet us. The gospel reading for this first Advent Sunday leans heavily in that direction, looking toward the ultimate return of Jesus—a supernatural in-breaking of the long anticipated second coming.

Today I do not want to take us there. I don't know about you, but I'm increasingly ambivalent about the notion that the world will end with a clarion blast of angel trumpets (sorry to disappoint you, Robert—as a superb trumpeter you'd be perfect for the part), "with the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Two thousand years of anticipating Jesus' return, and the end of the world as we know it, began with high expectation among many New Testament writers. Paul, John, Matthew, and the Thessalonian churches expected that return "very soon," certainly within their own lifetime. Interestingly, the further one moves through the chronology of Paul's letters the more the idea of the second coming retreats, as if it's 'delay' prompted Paul to reconsider how he should understand it. When ancient Christian writers, often beleaguered and persecuted, did write of the second coming, they borrowed images from Daniel and elsewhere that had been the stock-in-trade of end-times speculation for three hundred years. Fred Craddock writes:

Amid painful and prolonged suffering, when there can be seen on the horizon of predictable history no relief from disaster, faith turns its face toward heaven not only for a revelation of God's will but also for a vision of the end of the present misery and the beginning of the age to come. It is hope's response to the cynic who mocks the faithful,

saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4).

In considering a literal understanding of a wholly future second coming, I ask myself, of what possible value could that be to people in Jesus day, or people 1800, 1300, or 300 years ago, if that most intimate presence was always delayed? Instead of relying on God ultimately doing something dramatic, I want to turn away from the future and come intimately close to home to discover that real presence, to where the psalmist leads us.

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul [the implication is *now*]  
... in you I trust [*now*]  
Do not let me [be] put to shame,  
Lead me in your truth and teach me [*now*] (Psalm 25)

So close to home that we stand not with binoculars on some often romanticized future—which is not to discount the possibility of a future second coming—but knocking intimately at the inner sanctuary of the soul in the living present, where God and we intimately dwell. Looking to the future has its place when promised events beckon. But relying on future outcomes—like ultimately meeting God at some future time—is for so many a fragile thing when relied upon too exclusively. Trusting what others have predicted is a thin fabric if the thing promised turns out to be speculative or ill-conceived. People told Columbus that his voyage in search of the eastern spice lands by sailing west was spectacularly foolish because his ships would fall off the edge of the flat earth. It made some sense. After all, the horizon always has an edge to it. But they were wrong. Or if the promise maker turns out to be untrustworthy (my goodness, we’ve had enough of those in the news of late), then belief can implode as quickly as respect. Likewise, it’s equally risky to found your present faith merely on what others (including me) told you or encouraged you to believe. It’s like borrowing a neighbor’s wheelbarrow, a container that you cannot keep for when you most need it. It isn’t yours, you can’t claim it and own it. Indeed this has been the fragile experience of so many in Christendom for 1700 years in which faith has been far less a thing personally encountered and owned, than it has been a legacy from our parents, a tradition by birthright.

No, something else has to be trusted, an authority whose intimacy and conviction is unrivaled. Your *own experience*. If your experience of God is limited to what others have told you, your faith may be on thin ice. If it is compounded by your own experience of God in Christ, you have much surer footing—for nothing can take away what the soul already knows of its own experience. Emphasis on a

future second coming of Christ is no one's personal experience. But a resurrection experience can be anyone's.

The resurrection message rests not principally on the authority of the gospel that declares it—important as they are, springing as they do from each writer's experience of a vibrant living presence. That's still only information legacy. In a court of law that doesn't amount to much—we call it "hearsay," as I recall. No, what most energizes and sustains faith is the authority of your own experience. Let me give an example, not a perfect example because it's rooted in my experience which isn't easily transferable and embraceable as your own. But perhaps it will tap on the door of memory and resurrect in you some recollection of God acting in your life.

After a meeting in Princeton in October, I mislaid the minutes I had taken on a crucial meeting of the Seminary Development Committee. Periodically I checked here and there in files, folders, drawers and bags, but nowhere could I find them. Then the committee chair started getting anxious. It had been a very full and important meeting. So early Thursday evening I retraced my steps through every conceivable folder and draw in my home office. Nothing. The last thing I wanted was to have to organize a conference call with the VP for Development, and the chairperson, who lives in California, and waste an hour of their valuable time trying to reconstruct lengthy conversations from the agenda and memory of events six weeks ago. I stood by my desk in my home office, and did what we typically do when all else fails and we get desperate—I prayed: "Lord, *please* help me to find those notes!" Then I opened my eyes and immediately—I mean *instantly*, my eye fell on a legal pad on the typing stand by my computer. I picked it up, flipped back four pages to the top page, and there they were in all their pristine glory. "Thank you Lord." Is that grace, or what?

In the grand scheme of things it's not a profound story, but for me it was another in literally hundreds of lifetime incidents where God sent aid when invited.

God is not afar off, said Moses, that we should send someone across the sea, or to storm the gates of heaven for us, and bring him back to us. The Lord is very near, he is on your lips and in your heart that you might know him.

This is the resurrection presence. This is Advent's call to reconnect, not with one who has grown distant from us, but who is as intimate to us as the air we breathe. And all we have to do is knock patiently at the door of our own soul.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that we tend to be shaped by whatever it is we are waiting for—a baby, a house, a different job, more money to pay the bills, peace and justice on the earth, and end to the destruction of the planet.

Whatever it is that our hearts yearn for, chances are that it has something to do with our vision of what it would mean for us to be made whole, to be transformed into people who

are not afraid anymore, whose basic needs are met and whose wounds are healed and who are more nearly the people God created us to be.

“Among you [and therefore ‘within you’] stands one whom you do not know,” said John the Baptizer. Amen.

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