

Waiting

Like each of the gospels, Luke tells us the story of John the Baptist.¹ As I open my heart to it I am struck by the waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth had waited for a child until they had given up hope. Then Zechariah had to wait for nine months before he could say how God had blessed him and Elizabeth and in them all of Israel. Their son, John, seems to have spent his whole life, his whole religious life, waiting. His prophetic message was a call to others to join him in waiting, to learn to wait in fidelity for the God who was coming.

Reflected against the clarity of this story, I start to look at myself in a new way. I begin to notice how much of my life I spend waiting. I remember lying in bed as a little boy on Christmas eve, waiting for Santa Claus to come, praying that I would fall asleep soon, otherwise I'd just die from excitement. I think of how I wait for friends, of how I sometimes wait, wondering where my life will lead me. I wait in patience while I watch the students I teach grow from boys to men, for that takes time and I must know how to wait with them, if I am to help them. As I pray over these stories I know I am being called to see a great mystery of God's love in this waiting. It is not just wasting time. I am being invited to see this as a part of my journey. I have to learn to wait in faith like John the Baptist.

John seems to have begun his journey waiting in hope.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

(Luke 1:80)

Here I picture John called away from home, from friends, out into a wilderness of solitude. This is not a burdensome journey. It is difficult, but filled with huge hope. Something is stirring in his heart that draws him to the desert, into a wilderness where he does not yet possess his heart's desire but is filled with hope. This image of John heading into the wilderness of solitude reminds me that there is a loneliness and a corresponding hope in me that cannot be reached even by intimacy with other human beings. I need to be touched by God, to see all of creation transformed. I know I have been called into this expectant wilderness in the past and the call echoes once again in my heart now. I have to wait for him. Here my sense is that God is out before me, and he calls me into his future where my heart will know him. Gladly I journey into the wilderness waiting for him to come.

...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways shall be made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

(Luke 3:2-6)

John did not wait in vain. He left behind much; he journeyed into a wilderness, and there, filled with expectation, he waited for God. And God spoke to him. Sometimes this happens to you and me. We say our prayers; we do what we think God is calling us to; we wait hoping he will come into our hearts transforming our lives. Years of this simple, faithful, living slide by and then one day, as we go to mass or do our work, we have a quiet sense that he is with us. Very quietly we go on, knowing he has come; but like John we know we have to share this hope with others. Others need to be baptized into this waiting.

These moments of grace are not the end of our waiting. The mystery we enter through the waiting always points us beyond ourselves into the future. Only now our hearts are healed a little as we look to the future.

As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he was the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:15-16).

God found John as he waited in the wilderness and touched him. He became a man set apart who could awaken the deep hopes for God that slumbered in the hearts of men. But he knew he had to stay faithful to his waiting with and for God. His waiting was not yet finished. This is the deep humility that sometimes grows in a heart during years of waiting. Such a heart knows that waiting for God has its seasons. There is the waiting of early years that is often filled with great expectancy. There is another kind of waiting that is like being lost in a dark wood where we cannot find our way.

Waiting for God eventually brings us to boundary situations like death, the silence of God, or the collapse of our own vision of integrity. Then remembering our past is of no

help for the Lord is dealing with me in a startlingly new way. He is drawing me into the dark wilderness of my own heart, across the personal geography of my own inner space. But this is uncharted. For me it is unexplored. It is a surprising, sometimes frightening landscape that constantly looks much different than I think it should, or from the way I would like it to be. Only faith lets me know that this is the way home, though it is not traveled by my own wits and assumptions. Here I learn to wait for the Lord, who alone sees the way.²

John seems to have entered into this dark wood at the hands of Herod.

But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison (Luke 3:19-20).

John sits in prison waiting. The story seeps into me. Even after Jesus' coming, when he was in prison for speaking the truth, John was still waiting and wondering. My heart goes to the story in Luke 7:18-23 where John sends asking, "Are you the one?"

The disciples of John told him of all these things. And John, calling to him two of his disciples, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" In that hour he cured many of the diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me."

As I live this story I begin to know something of what was

happening in John. I stand here in the middle of my own life, imprisoned by my own selfishness and fears and in some ways by yours as well; and I find myself asking the same thing John did: "Is this it? Is this what I have been waiting for?" Jesus' response to John's question gnaws at me, especially the ending "Blessed is he who takes no offense at me." John already knows of Jesus' preaching and the healings he performs. What, then, is Jesus saying to John and to me? I begin to think it is a call to discern in these events what I had not seen. Before I entered this dark wood it was so easy to say that these were signs of the mystery of God's saving love. But now, as I pray over these words, I start to think that this probably wasn't quite what John was expecting. He seems to have been waiting for the heavens to be torn open and for this sinful age to come to a crashing end. Then God who had been silent for so long would come in power and glory bringing the new age, where the faithful would live in peace with him and one another. But what we have here, for all its miraculous power, is so ordinary, so everyday. What of all those who weren't touched by Jesus? A few people come to see. A few get fed. But power, as John knows, remains ruthless. Pilate and Herod still rule. The high priests are not men of faith. The world hasn't been ripped apart and put together in a healed way. The Prophet rots in prison while Jesus invites him to still believe. "Blessed is he who takes no offense at me." I see myself so clearly in John. I could go into the wilderness with hope that God would come into my life, transforming it and my world. Now in this dark wood where his presence is so confusing, I can see how one could give up waiting in faith. God's presence is so hidden, and the agony about me is so intense.

Knowing what is happening in my heart, Jesus calls me back to waiting. When I first entered the wilderness I lived

on the word of God. I read it with an open heart, letting the images sink into me. This is the way we have been praying over the gospel stories. As this way of praying deepens in you and me, it becomes a central part of our lives. Here I meet the Lord, my Beloved, and I am brought to life. Here I am strengthened so that I can be faithful to my mission in life, to family and friends. At least at times there is a sense of God's presence in my life, and I need that. I can't afford to let it go. Then I find that this prayer is becoming more and more passive, more and more vague. Then it is gone, only to come back in flashes and be gone again. The silence takes over. I know I am losing my way of listening to the word of the Lord. This is very frightening. I feel the dark wood closing in on me.

It went in the past, but then the reasons were clear: I got tired of it. Boredom set in and I fell away. Or there was some kind of serious infidelity. But this does not seem to be the case here. Still, there is a sense in which I cannot pray the way I did, or at least not regularly. One day I can, but then for two or three days it just doesn't work anymore. Further, I experience this real disinclination to pray in this way, even though I am more serious about wanting to pray than ever before. Instead I feel drawn to sit before the tabernacle in silence. Welling up from the depths there is a need to be totally still and wait for God. An emptiness opens up before me. Unlike the filled quiet of my previous prayer, this stillness seems so empty.

This is a passage that happens differently for different people. For some, at first there are no words; the imagination stops; there is no thinking. Gradually there is a developing awareness that there isn't just silence either. In the very silence there is someone present, someone who stirs you up, who frightens you, who burns you. It isn't peace you

find here, or at least not serenity, but painful excitement. Afterwards you have the feeling that you are more real and deeper and are drawn again the next day to meet this raging fire in the darkness that is beyond words. Gradually we come to sense that this is God, the Father of Jesus whom he brings us to meet; and we intuitively know it is so painful because he is really close to us and changing us. While the experience of prayer isn't easy, a great peace, a fundamental integrity, tends to settle over the rest of our lives. We are more energetic in our work, more faithful in our commitments. Our lives seem more focused.

In the beginning of this new phase in prayer there often are no words, or if there are it means that we are distracted. However, for some people there comes a point when there is a word; and that word is uttered into the darkness in faith, into the darkness that might upset us, but that also calls to us with a strange healing joy. Usually such a word is short. "God." "Father." "Jesus." "Help." There is nothing more to say. That little word says it all. It says what I am or would be but cannot explain or act out or even understand. But in that word I collect myself and hurl myself into the searing but healing darkness. Meanwhile this still and holy darkness calls to me, purifies me, vivifies me. I say the word and then am still; then I say it again. These two ways of praying seem to be transitional; and as we grow into them, as the prayer deepens in us, they too gradually seem to be left behind. They seem to evaporate.

In God's wisdom he leads others directly into deep silence without any transition. Back when you could meditate you kind of knew you were praying. You could practically watch it. And in the silence dominated by God's holy presence there was a sense of awe, but at least there was no question that it was real. Now things become so vague. I sit down to

pray. I read the gospel stories and then slip into this bland silence. It seems to come upon me. But is there anyone there? Is this just daydreaming? It is very hard to tell. Am I playing games?

There is a greater sense of detachment, a greater longing for God, and a desire, even an ability to follow Jesus in his way of simplicity, trust and service. And there is this perplexing silence into which I seem to be drawn. The fear is that there is no one there in the silence. This is a crucial turning point. Can I choose to wait in silence, to wait when I cannot understand what is happening, can hardly experience it? Do I intuitively trust the God who calls me into this stillness? Or do I panic when I can no longer understand, or experience God's presence? This is a passage of the spiritual life where the path of fidelity is to wait. To trust what God is doing, even when we can't understand it. After all where is our trust? In God or our own understanding and experience? The words of Eliot come back at me telling me what to do.

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing;
wait without love for love would be love of the wrong thing;
there is yet faith but the faith and the love and
the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.³

If we wait, slowly the stillness deepens. We have to let the words, the images, the more tangible sense of God go. God is moving in the depths of the heart, deeper than the intellect or imagination can reach. This takes time and patience and trust. There may come a time when the imagination can be wandering around upstairs, but you are silent below it. Because the prayer has moved deeper within us, to bother

with this chatter that is going on upstairs would draw us away from the real encounter with God that is happening on a much deeper level. In the deepening silence, beyond words and images, beyond anything you or I can understand, any meaning that can be adequately expressed in words, God is forming us in the depths of our hearts. This is what Jeremiah has told us.⁴

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O House of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? says the Lord. Behold, like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O House of Israel."
(Jeremiah 18:1-6)

This learning to wait in a deeper way does not happen only in prayer. Often the facts of our lives draw us into situations where it is very hard to tell what is the path of fidelity. Reality becomes so complicated. With a simplicity that is really new we are willing to follow the Lord wherever he leads, but we can't see where that is. This is a time of pruning. We grope along being drawn into situations where there are few clear-cut answers. We find ourselves bound to others and the Lord in ways we hardly understand, that seem to lack the clarity of our early years in the wilderness. We can't guarantee what will happen tomorrow. The sure conviction that somehow "it will all work out" slips away from us. I am face to face with situations that seem to be dead ends. My old way of listening to the Lord, making decisions and trying to carry them through ruthlessly won't work any more. I have to learn to trust more deeply, waiting

for the Lord to do what seems to be impossible. I cling to the words of Micah.

He has showed you, O man, what is good
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
(Micah 6:8)

In Luke 9:7-9 we hear very matter-of-factly that John has died in prison still waiting.

Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen. Herod said, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" And he sought to see him.

Humanly speaking it looks like nothing happened, that the waiting was a dead end. Back in Luke 7:26 Jesus had called John a prophet, "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." To believe Jesus is to enter into another season of waiting, to open one's self up to waiting that is a kind of death. Sometimes this leads me to wait for my friends' lives to be healed. When I have done what I can, or while I continue to do it, I often have to wait in faith not pretending I understand. At other times I have to wait as a loved one dies or collapses before my eyes, when all I can do is wait as I agonize with them. There is nothing you can do, absolutely nothing, except be with the other in their pain and dependence. And our own helpless inadequacies and fumbling attempts to comfort confront us with our poverty. This is a desert that I never imagined, but here I am baptized into waiting. In the waiting our prayers change from, "Let this chalice pass us by," to "dear Lord, release him soon from this suffering" to "dear Lord, your will, your

time, your place . . . whatever your heart dictates. Because even in, and perhaps especially in, pain and confusion we are enveloped in your love." After my prayer I think maybe one day I'll see clearly enough to strike that "perhaps" out of that last sentence.

And life goes on. In this killing waiting our illusions die. We are forced to face our utter poverty; we are drawn into a fidelity to the Lord and others deeper than we can understand. In this killing waiting the prophecy of Ezekiel begins to happen in my heart.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:26-28)

¹Cf. W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge, 1968).

²This seems to be very close to what John of the Cross counsels in *The Living Flame*, III, 29. "The soul, then should advert that God is the principal agent in this matter, and that He acts as the blind man's guide who must lead it by the hand to the place it does not know to reach (to supernatural things of which neither its intellect, will, nor memory can know the nature). It should use all its principal care in watching so as not to place any obstacle in the way of its guide on the road that God has ordained for it according to His law and of the faith, as we said."

³T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*. N.Y.: Harvest Books, 1971. These lines come from "East Coker," lines 122-127.

⁴For the classical analysis of this transition into silent prayer see John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, II, 12-15; *Dark Night*, I, 9-10 and *The Living Flame*, III, 32-49.