

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Mark 1:1-8 Waiting, like John-the-Baptist

Waiting, waiting, we spend most of our lives waiting: waiting to grow up, waiting to get to school or to work, waiting to graduate or to get that job or promotion, waiting for love, waiting for happiness, we earthly creatures of God spend our whole lives waiting. The four Sunday prior to Christmas is called "advent". Advent is a time of "waiting for the coming of Jesus". Today we celebrate the 2nd Sunday of Advent and again we are waiting. In some ways we may ask, "What are we waiting for in Advent?" We as Christians already know the "end" of the story. Last week we discussed the Signs and Wonders of Advent, and what wonders we encountered. But if we already know the end of the story, *i.e.*, that Jesus of Nazareth was born, was baptized by John-the-Baptist, served a relatively short ministry, was crucified by the earthly powers and resurrected by the Heavenly power for our salvation, what are we waiting for? To approach this question we have three stories of waiting, waiting for the coming of Christ Jesus. The three stories are set in different times and places: Nazareth, the River Jordan, and Burundi, central Africa. Not only are our destinations of our stories different, but so are the times of waiting. Let us take a trip to each in our mind and see who is waiting.

#1. The first destination is a dusty, small town of Nazareth, an outpost for

travelers in the margins of the Roman Empire administered under Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, and Rome's client King of the Jews of Galilee from 20 BCE to 39 CE. The scene is the likely the house of young peasant girl, a virgin, who receives an annunciation from Gabriel, a messenger of God, telling her that she is to conceive the Son of the Most High, a boy to be named "Yehoshua"[Hebrew], "Iēsoûs"[Greek], Jesus, meaning "Yahweh (God) rescues". So, Mary ponders the irruption of God into her life, and as we know from her beautiful hymn *Magnificat*, she understands that this is not a baby of Joseph's, but will be the Son of Man, Son of God. How beautiful is her acceptance of this message, when she has everything to lose socially and seeks refuge elsewhere. She visits with Elizabeth, wife of the Temple priest Zechariah, who although barren until her old age, is now 6 months with child. Elizabeth's son will be named "John", and she, unlike Mary, benefits from the pregnancy which elevates her already high stature in her community and that of her husband Zechariah. Both Mary and Elizabeth are waiting. Both wait for nine long months of labor, knowing that nearly one in five mothers will succumb in child birth, but they wait, patiently. Knowing that their lives are actually in jeopardy by the very divine irruption in their lives, Mary and Elizabeth wait. Mary awaits the birth of the Son of the Most High and somehow finds the courage to accept her message, to travel to see

Elizabeth out of fear of persecution, to carry this baby to be named Jesus. Mary remembers what Gabriel said, something that we all should cherish in our hearts, minds, and souls everyday, **“For nothing is impossible with God”**

#2. Our next scene is located on the east bank of the Jordan River just a few kilometers above the Dead Sea, and between the harsh Judean desert and the desolate Moabite wilderness. The River Jordan runs first into the Sea of Galilee and on to Lebanon. We are at the Bethany site, a site close to Herod Antipas's favored hot springs retreat at Callirhoe. We are seated just beneath the mountain fortress of Mukawir. The time is about 30 CE and Elizabeth's son John has been commissioned by God to a ministry of baptism in the “living” water of the River Jordan. John-the-Baptist was known in the historical accounts of Titus Flavius Josephus, the noted 1st C Palestine historian. Josephus's two most important works are [The Jewish War](#) (c. 75) and [Antiquities of the Jews](#) (c. 94). John-the-Baptist has been following the commissioning by God to baptize unto repentance the sinners, redeeming them through baptism, a long time Jewish tradition. John baptizes in the “living” water, which is a tradition that is not so common today. In the City several weeks ago, I was moved by participating in a full immersion baptism in the “living” waters flowing like a river in the Christ Chapel of Riverside Church. I thought to myself what it must have been like for John. Picture this wide river, more than waist deep in most places and depending upon the seasonal rainfall. Out in the middle, we see John-the-Baptist, standing day after day in the River Jordan, baptizing the sinners unto repentance, but waiting, always waiting. Such faith to be faithfully baptizing the many people who travel to Bethany to find John in the River Jordan, day after day, year upon year. John is waiting, waiting not 9 months,

but years, living from the honey and locust, clothed in camel hair cloth and robes, he waits. Patiently he waits. After so many months and years, there appears on the East bank another young man. John knows when first he sees Him, this is The Son of the Most High. The scripture (Mark 1:9-10) goes on with our story, ⁹At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.” Think of this, how many of us would stand out in a rushing, cold river, day after day, month after month, for years waiting for anything? In this case, John is awaiting the coming of the Messiah. What faith, what exhilaration, what spiritual moment, to baptize the Son of Man, to enter into his ministry, to claim Him as our own. We in the here and now need to claim Jesus Christ as God claims us. We are claimed by the water of baptism, by the oil with which Jesus was anointed, by the baptism of the Holy Spirit that we receive from the Pentecost and the desire in our hearts to find our way to God through Jesus. Just as we leave our seats, just beneath the mountain fortress of Mukawir, we must bring John-the-Baptist's story to a close. It is here where it is believed that Herodias' daughter Salome performed her famous original version of the "Dance of the Seven Veils" and where John-the-Baptist was subsequently beheaded.

#3. Our next travel takes us to Tanzania, in central Africa. The time in 2007 and we get this vivid picture from a colleague at Union Theological Seminary. My classmate Drew Hendrickson shared with us a video that he took in 2007 in Tanzania where he was on a mission to help the Christian exiles from Burundi to be repatriated. In Tanzania, these people were marginalized; *i.e.*, accepted, but not embraced; tolerated, but not freed. Burundians fled to neighboring Tanzania to

escape the heights of civil wars that broke out in the 1970's and again in the 1990's. For the Christian members of this group, they have been waiting 17-35 years, waiting with the hope of God through the saving grace of Jesus Christ, waiting to once again embrace their "promised land", their homeland, their "Israel". Drew accompanied one village of people in whom he had worked as a missionary in preparing for and traveling back to Burundi as the long waiting was coming to a close. In the video you note the broad smiling faces of the people, some old, some young, most had never touched foot in Burundi. Most of the people in the caravan wore necklaces displaying a Christian cross. These people have been awaiting deliverance from a liberating God, from Jesus Christ who blessed the poor, oppressed, and marginalized peoples of the world. In Swahili, the people chant over and over, "Ana Bwa Istzi, Bwana, Bwana, Bwana", or "We bless you our Lord". Having reached their homeland, this waiting of the Burundi Christians is over. They knew then, what they know in 2008, the murder, rape, and destruction will continue in Burundi until Christendom spreads its Holy envelope over all the people of central Africa, and the earthly world. Thus after more than 3 decades of waiting, the Burundi people still await the blessings of God and the true liberation of Jesus Christ. Waiting, still waiting, we earthly creatures are always waiting. "A voice of one calling in the desert" (Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:3), we all are still waiting.

As we close with the hope of Isaiah 40, with the reaffirmation of the Gospel in our reading, what are we waiting for? Has it already come, YES or NO???? Well, the answer is both "YES", and "BUT YET". For as Christians in the 21st century we have 2 millennia of powerful testimony of others, as well as our own testimonies, our small stories, each precious and unique about how

Jesus Christ has "saved" us. **But yet**, we are only somewhere along the road of our spiritual journey of Christian faith. We have faith, but often it seems like to little. It seems too little especially when we find ourselves in the middle of a "festive" season when hearts, we are told, are filled with gladness. Just last week in our Sunday worship, two members reminded us that there too is also sadness. Sometimes indeed my heart is not filled with gladness, but sadness. When we see the poverty of the homeless, our hearts are filled with sadness. When we hear of yet another place in the world where war, civil strife, or terrorism has broken out, our hearts are filled with sadness. When we see with the "eyes of our hearts" (as Paul says, Ephesians 1:18) the destitute, downtrodden, sick, and alienated among us or in our own lives, our hearts are filled with sadness. When we learn that 33 million of God's people are infected with HIV/AIDS and more than a third are children and untreated, our hearts are filled with sadness. Sounds pretty sad to me, how about you?

But yet, it is because we are still waiting, waiting for our hearts to be lifted up by God through the coming (again) of Jesus Christ. We celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas time (it is because of this) that our hearts are being filled with the gladness of spiritual hope. When we pray for the outbreak of peace in our troubled world, our hearts are being filled with the gladness of spiritual hope. When we contribute this morning and throughout the year to the collection of the saints for our mission to help our church in its many efforts to feed the poor, heal the sick, and give hope to the downtrodden, our hearts are being filled with the gladness of spiritual hope. When we see even the smallest examples of people being freed from the bondage of oppression, our hearts are being filled with the gladness of spiritual hope. When we see continued research into HIV/AIDS and medical

scourges like malaria, cholera, and mental afflictions, our hearts are being filled with the gladness of spiritual hope.

Waiting, waiting, waiting, yes friends we are waiting for our hearts and minds to be refreshed by the knowledge that Jesus Christ WAS, Jesus Christ IS, Jesus Christ WILL ALWAYS BE. We know, **but yet** we don't fully, and so we wait in Advent. We sense, **but yet** we seek to feel the Spirit even more powerfully and so we wait in Advent. We are like Mary, we are like John-the-Baptist, waiting, waiting, waiting,.....and look on the other shore to the East. Praise God. Jesus is coming, our waiting is over. The level of the river may rise, but look on the other shore to the East. Praise God. Jesus is coming, **our waiting is over.**

Let us pray.