

The Meaning is in the Waiting

A Reflection by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 23, 2021 (Pentecost Sunday)

Friendship Presbyterian Church

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

*And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.*

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

(Acts 2:1-21, NRSV)

For us here at Friendship, the day we have longed for has finally come. We are back together again, after over 14 months of being exiled from this space. The time apart has not been wasted – we have grown and been stretched in ways that we could hardly have imagined, and we have learned, perhaps more than we ever counted on, about ourselves and others and life itself. But something precious and priceless has been restored to us.

And yet, we also know, all has *not* been restored. The pandemic and the risks are not quite over. We still have to be aware of where we are and what we're doing and how what we do (or don't do) affects others. And so, for all the joy of coming home, it's not all back to normal – not yet. And so, things may still feel a little up in the air – like we're still waiting for some word, some answer, some *something* that will make everything alright.

There is an austere, beautiful poem that especially speaks to me today by the late Welsh poet and priest R.S. Thomas. It's entitled "Kneeling" and it imagines a prolonged moment of silence in a church, full of parishioners and a minister, all kneeling and patiently waiting for a message from God:

*Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
 Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.*

It's that last line which I find so full of significance: "*The meaning is in the waiting.*"

We know that with the mystery of God, there is no "right here, right now." That's not how it works. To my occasional irritation, God is not an app I can turn on to get the answers I need or the peace I long for. God seems not terribly interested in my expectations, nor in meeting my schedule. Life in God is something different entirely.

We've been around long enough, you and I, to know that the life of faith is not like putting coins into a vending machine, pushing the right buttons, and then getting what we ordered up. Things don't usually happen on the timetables we would like. We pray for a loved one – for

healing – and they may go on hurting. We pray for peace in the world, and war continues. We simply pray to come back together for worship, and now we do, but can't safely sing together just yet.

In the smaller ways, it can be frustrating. In bigger ways, it can be heartbreaking. But then, time after time, we've seen how the meaning is in the waiting.

Our thoughts may turn to those mentors in faith we've known, those so filled with love and peace and joy that remembering them re-awakens something in us. It's *not* that all their prayers have been answered quickly, or that everything always works out for them and on time. They may come from many different backgrounds and speak in different tongues, but they have something in common ... they know how to *wait*, as if they have come to learn through a lifetime's practice that the meaning we seek *is* in the waiting. They know that they're not in control, and because they know that, they are patient enough to stick around long enough to know what it is to be surprised by joy.

Those first disciples of Jesus had, by this second chapter of Acts, been chastened enough by their experience of running out ahead of him to know better than to try to surge forward without further guidance. They *knew* that they didn't know, and they knew that the work to which they were being called was, in human terms, *impossible* – which of course makes it an ideal project for the Holy Spirit!

And so, following the risen Jesus' instructions, they return to Jerusalem to commit themselves to prayer – and to waiting for the empowerment of the Spirit, as Jesus himself had promised. They know that without this empowerment, they quite literally don't have it in them to do what they are being called to do.

But their waiting is a particular *kind* of waiting. It is not a sort of wishful waiting – “maybe someday something will happen” – but a *confident, expectant* waiting, a solid trust that God *will* act ... and soon!

This is what the disciples are experiencing as they prayerfully wait in that upper room for the promise to be made manifest. They wait as those who have come to know themselves – both their own gifts and their own limitations. But even more, *they wait as those who know the living God*. They wait as those who know that “There be dragons ahead,” but they also know the one who alone can equip them to face those dragons.

The psalmist wrote that “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1). We naturally want to surge forward in the name of *doing* something, after being cooped up for so long. We may find it hard to be patient, especially now as the light begins to break through.

But the wisdom of the Spirit in this moment calls us to a course that is more about listening than it is speaking ... more about knowing that we don't know than about anything we think we *do* know ... and far, far more about waiting for God than it is rushing ahead on our own steam.

In any case, the promised gift, when it comes (and it *does* come), makes all the waiting worth it. Waiting can be the hardest part, they say, but it can be the best part too.

To the glory of God! Amen.