

## A Theology of Waiting

Advent is here. The trees are out, the cherished songs are being sung, the candles are being lit.

*Why* is Caley preaching a sermon on the *second* coming of Christ?

Situating our service today between the texts of Mark 1 (“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!”) and 2 Peter 3 (“But the Lord will come like a thief”) sets us up for a bit of a Dickensian “Christ past, Christ present and Christ future” vibe.

Relative to the amount of time the Gospel story took to play out (twenty-some years), “waiting” comprises most of our faith story. Therefore, this advent season we follow up last week’s centering question: “How long shall we wait?” with today’s centering question: “What shall we do *while* we wait?”

While 2 Peter carries the apostle’s name, scholars believe the letter was likely written a generation or two after Peter’s death to the scattered churches in Asia Minor.

In a way this chapter in 2 Peter is articulating a “theology of waiting.” 2000 years later, we see waiting as par for the course, but the first generation of the church believed the return of Christ to be so immediate that the concern seemed more about how everything was going to get done before those final days.

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul writes that “the time is short...for this world in its present form is passing away.” Get married if you need to, but don’t worry too much about it, because it’s go time.

But the tone of 2 Peter is different.

That first generation, including anybody that knew or engaged with Jesus and his disciples is passing away. The church is in its first major stage of transition: from the apostolic church (that is, the church founded and led by those who walked with Jesus) to the post-apostolic church.

This came with its share of confusion and disappointments, as well as a lot of condescension from those on the outside.

What kind of God leaves and doesn't come back?

This passage addresses Christ's second coming, but it also speaks to those whose faith questions are a bit broader:

How does God relate to humankind?

What does the Creator have in mind for creation?

Is life just a continuum from creation till now, without an expectation of heavenly intervention?

The writer of 2 Peter reflects on the nature of time, on what this unexpected delay tells us about the character of God, and what *our* ethical response to this time of waiting should be.

If you have spent your life listening to sermons you have likely heard a preacher explain the difference between *chronos* time and *kairos* time.

(If you haven't, here it comes again.)

*Chronos* time is the kind you keep on your watch. It is the kind that distinguishes between Sunday and Monday and ensures you show up here at 9:30 AM instead of 9:30 PM.

Our workdays, our yearly calendars, *including* our observances of Christian holidays, are governed by *chronos* time.

60 minutes an hour, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

*Kairos* time is God's time. It is eternal. It requires you to let go of your iron-grip on *chronos* time, and even then it is a mystery.

By following the Christian calendar (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter) we are attempting to encounter *chronos* time and *kairos* time simultaneously. Advent is always in December (*chronos* time), but in worshiping, rereading the text and repeating our rituals, we transcend *chronos* time to connect with God, with past generations of Christians, and with those who lived the original story.

This is timeless, or rather, it is God's time.

Advent is an opportunity to rethink our relationship with time. And the writer of 2 Peter encourages his readers to do the same by quoting from Psalm 90:

“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day”

*Kairos* time.

The unanticipated wait for Christ's return is not a math problem, or a lapse in God's faithfulness. It is a part of God's timing and it tells us about the character of God.

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

In an age of political and religious polarization, our posture is increasingly one of: “We tried. They won’t listen. They’re not coming. Good riddance. Let's go on without them.”

This is not the way God operates, our text tells us.  
Our God is gracious, our God is persistent and our God is patient.

But our God is also just.  
A time for righting the wrongs of injustice means that there has to be an end to *chronos* time. A time in history where things are made right.

A God that leaves the door open perpetually for anybody, without repercussions for injustice and wrongdoing is not only not a just God, it is not a loving God.

This is why our text today is so apocalyptic.  
“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.”

Does the writer of 2 Peter mean this literally?

Some say no. John Frederick writes:

*In apocalyptic literature, the language of cosmic destruction and cataclysmic disaster was used to express — not the end of the physical universe — but the imminent arrival of an event of great political and/or spiritual significance.*

*Thus, Jesus in Matthew 24 uses the language of international wars, earthquakes, famines, and birth pains to prophesy about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem*

*Interestingly [though], rather than [using] typical Jewish apocalyptic categories of melting mountains and falling stars, Peter takes up popular Stoic language that was widely known by Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world of the time. In Stoic thinking, the cyclical destruction of the world through fire (known as “the conflagration”), was indeed conceived of as a literal happening through which the world was destroyed and restarted in an endless cycle.*

So literal or not, it really depends who you ask.

I find that a lot of the same people who roll their eyes at people that take apocalyptic literature literally are the same people who believe that due to the consequences of our actions, the planet will overheat in the imminent future, bringing an end to humanity as we know it.

Quite frankly that doesn't sound that different from the biblical text.

**The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare**

In the end, apocalyptic literature is less about predicting *how* things will end, but addressing the broader questions I brought up earlier:

How does God relate to humankind?

What does the Creator have in mind for creation?

For the writer of 2 Peter, the apocalyptic is good news, because it speaks to a God who is active in the world, working for our good.

**“But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”**

L Ann Jervis writes:

*The righteousness of God and Christ means that what is evil will not last. It cannot last. The righteousness of God and Christ means that all that opposes the pure goodness of God and Christ has a limited shelf life.*

*God's righteousness means that there will be a day of reckoning. Christ's righteousness means he will participate in the cleansing judgment of God.*

*The present status quo will end.*

So, to summarize the text sofar:

Jesus has not come in our lifetime as we expected  
God's time is different than our time.

What we perceive as delay is actually the patience of God, extended to all so that they may have the chance to repent and return to right relationship with their Creator.

God is just, therefore Jesus *will* return, in God's time.

So let's return to our focus question:

“What shall we do *while* we wait?”

If waiting is inevitable, what disposition will our waiting take?

How will our waiting shape us?

Not all waiting is the same

When I fly, I observe two kinds of waiting.

There is the waiting for your flight at the gate.

There is no less inspiring group of human beings than the ones waiting to get on a plane.

Just burning time. Glued to their phones, staring blankly out the window, sleeping in awkward positions.

But have you ever come through your gates at your destination and seen the people waiting for their loved ones to arrive?  
Holding signs, straining their necks, eagerly looking at the face of everyone who walks out, to see if it is the one they have been waiting for?  
No phones, no sleeping, no staring awkwardly out the window.

I think that's the kind of waiting Peter is calling us to.

“Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming...So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”

Frederick writes:

The waiting for the unexpected arrival changes the way the believer speaks and acts...The waiting forms the community into a life of holiness and godliness.

Waiting shapes us. But only if we're actively waiting.

Only if we are intentional and invested in our communities of faith  
Only if our spiritual disciplines shape us into more proactive and engaged friends, co-workers and members of our communities.

Our right response to God's providential care is faithful living through the practice of godliness, pointing others to be in communion with the one who has formed and redeemed creation

So while Mark 1 reminds us that the coming of the Messiah is always a time of repentance, Second Peter reminds us that the invitation to repentance is always a grace-filled invitation.

How shall we wait?

Wait in anticipation, godliness and hope.

As we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.