

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Do You Hear What I Hear? Waiting for God”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

He wasn't there. The hour had arrived and the professor was not in the classroom. It was my first semester of college and I wasn't sure what to do. I was on time. My classmates were on time. But the professor wasn't. Soon there was this buzz going around the room. It was a discussion about how long we had to wait for the professor to show up before we could leave. This discussion included the fact that you had to wait longer for a full professor than an assistant professor...and the length of time you have to wait for each. Finally, we reached a collective decision that we would wait until 20 minutes passed class time and then we were out of there. And so, when the professor had still not arrived at twenty past, we were all scattered to the winds.

How long do you have to wait? My guess this is a question we have asked ourselves far too many times in our lives. How long do we have to wait before we give up and go on our way? If you have ever been there then you have a sense of how the people around Jesus were feeling. They wanted to know how long they were going to have to wait for God to act to establish God's amazing and life-giving kingdom. They had been waiting for about one-hundred years. They had been waiting since the Roman Empire had pushed out the Jewish leaders and had taken control of the nation. Even though there were local Jewish leaders in place, everyone knew that they were merely the surrogates of the Romans, doing whatever Rome wanted. And what Rome commanded was more money, more wheat and more adherence to Roman culture and civilization. These demands were tearing at the heart of not only the nation but of the faith of the people. So how long were they going to have to wait for God to act?

Why did they think that God would ever act? The answer can be found in both of our passages this morning. For more than seven hundred years the people of Israel knew that they were chosen by God; that as long as they were faithful, God would protect them. God would liberate them. And by the time of Jesus, this belief had morphed into what we call Apocalyptic visions of God's arrival and liberation. Jesus states that, *“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”* The implication here is that not only will God act and act decisively, but that God will act sooner rather than later. So, the question with which the people wrestled was how long should they have to wait before they gave up and simply quit believing? Or before they took matters into their own hands and rebelled against Rome. How long should they wait?

How long should we wait? In a world that now seems once again at the brink of nuclear war. That seems to be moving backwards rather than forwards in terms of freedom. In a world in which more

than half of the people on the face of the earth live on less than one dollar a day. In this world, how long should we wait on God before we either give up or decide we must bring about the Kingdom ourselves? The answer is, as long as it takes. We are to wait as long as it takes for God to complete the work that God has begun in Jesus of Nazareth.

If that is so, then the question before us is how long ought we to wait. At Advent by Candlelight, Rev. Joanne talked about this sense of actively and not passively waiting. This idea of actively waiting goes to the heart of this story. It does so because at the end of Jesus' apocalyptic vision he tells the story of the land owner, who, on going away puts his servants in charge of the property. Each was given a task to do to maintain what the owner had left in their trust. Jesus then reminds his listeners that not only were the servants to be faithful in their task, but they were to be faithful in those tasks regardless of how long it took for the master to return. They were to actively wait as long as it took. You and I are those servants. We have been tasked with the work of keeping up creation until Christ returns, even if it is another two-thousand years. We are tasked with actively waiting.

. What I want to do now is to take a couple of minutes before we end to expand on the idea of active waiting. The image I want to use is that of waiting from the inside out. Our active waiting begins with our own inner spiritual development. Through prayer and spiritual disciplines, we are to deepen our relationship with God in Christ. We are to seek God's will for us. We are to ask "What does God desire of us and who does God desire us to be." Next, we are to take those insights and put them to work among our neighbors. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison and in general, actively love and serve those near to us; those we encounter every day. Finally, we are to wait by working in the wider world for justice. Justice is one of the most frequently used Biblical words. It means working in the larger community, nation and world to right the wrongs and address the injustices that exist. It means working with others to bring about a world that looks a little more today than yesterday, like the Kingdom of God.

After two-thousand years it would be easy to give up and simply go our own way. On this morning however, I want to challenge you not to, but to ask yourselves this question. How am I actively waiting from the inside out, as a faithful servant of the one who has asked me to care for his creation?