

WAITING

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, December 3, 2006
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Readings

From the poetry of T.S. Eliot:

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.

From the prophet Isaiah, in the 40th chapter:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
God is the everlasting One, the Creator of the ends of the earth,
Who does not faint nor grow weary, whose understanding is unsearchable,
Who gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and grow weary, and the young fall exhausted;
But those who wait for God shall renew their strength.
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not be faint.

And from the Gospel according to Matthew, in the 11th chapter

When John [the Baptist] heard in prison what the Messiah was doing,
he sent word by two of his followers to say to him, "Are you the One
who is to come? Or shall we wait for another?" Jesus answered them,
"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight,
the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who
takes no offense at me."

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Once upon a time, in a Jewish *shtetl* in Eastern Europe, there was a poor crippled man named Yitzhak. The village elders believed strongly in giving everyone dignified work. But there was very little that poor Yitzhak could do, given all his physical limitations. The elders therefore decided to have him sit in the gate of the village, from dawn to dusk, to wait and watch for the coming of the Messiah. For each day he sat there, ready to shout if the Messiah appeared, they paid him a few kopeks. Year after year Yitzhak sat there. One winter, as he shivered in the gate in his thin coat, Yitzhak realized that he hadn't had any increase in pay since he started. So he went to the elders and asked them for a raise. They deliberated, but turned him down, saying, "It's true, Yitzhak, that the pay *is* low; and you have been very faithful. But you must admit this – the work *is* steady."

I don't know about you, but I am not good at waiting – not at all. Like most people in our culture, I'm impatient if a few keystrokes don't make a web-page open in just seconds, or if I'm kept on hold when I call an office, or if someone doesn't quickly reply to an email, or if the check is in the mail, or if dinner is delayed. Yet much of my real work is waiting. My spiritual work, that is. Yours, too, I suspect. Just what we are waiting for may vary, even somehow ultimately be beyond naming. Yet when I began working alongside a number of you on deepening our devotional lives through a daily practice called "Living by Heart," I wasn't surprised when the very first stage was called "The Attentive Heart: Waiting," and we were encouraged to take to heart these words of poet May Sarton:

The phoebe sits on her nest/ Hour after hour,/ Day after day,
Waiting for life to burst out/ From under her warmth.
Can I weave a nest for silence,/ Weave it of listening,/

Listening,/ Layer upon layer?

But one must first become small,/ Nothing but a presence,
Attentive as a nesting bird/ Proffering no slightest wish,
No tendril of a wish/ Toward anything that might happen
Or be given,/ Only the warm, faithful waiting,/

Contained in one's smallness.
Beyond the question, the silence.
Beyond the answer, the silence.

The Hasids say that one night the Rabbi of Kotzk was entertaining some learned friends, when suddenly he put on a serious expression and asked them all a question. "Tell me," he said, "where is God? Where today is the dwelling place of the Most High?" "Why, what a thing to ask!" they replied. "Aren't the holy scriptures quite clear on that point? The whole world is God's dwelling place, full of God's glory!" The Rabbi just pointed to his own breast. "No, friends," he said. "God is in those hearts that give God a dwelling."

For that to happen, taught the Hasids, you yourself must begin. It's not enough to wait. The great sage Martin Buber captured their fervent devotional spirit aptly when he wrote, "Existence will remain meaningless for you if you yourself do not penetrate it with your active love, and if you do not in this way discover its real meaning for yourself. Everything is waiting, to be hallowed by you; it is waiting for its meaning to be disclosed and to be realized by you. . . Meet the world with the fullness of your own attentiveness and you shall meet God. If you wish to believe, then love!"

This is not unlike the tone taken by the Rabbi from Nazareth who said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." Who refused to be called the Messiah, the anointed one. And yet, when asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another," also did not say to wait, but to pay attention to what was taking all place around him.

"My work is loving the world," says Mary Oliver. "Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?/ Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me/ keep my mind on what matters, which is my work,/ which is mostly standing still and learning to be/ Astonished."

No, it is not enough to just wait. You yourself must begin. But unless you learn the art of spiritual waiting, you will like only wait “for the wrong thing,” as T.S. Eliot wisely put it.

There’s a wonderful story you may have heard before, about a great religious community, a monastery, which had fallen upon hard times. Morale was down. The building was in poor repair. No new novices were joining the order. The community was reduced to only four aging monks and their increasingly anxious leader, the abbot. Once the monastery had been the very spiritual center of the whole region – a place of learning and scholars, one where the nobles and merchants came to worship and go on retreat, where works of charity were encouraged, shelter was given to the homeless and the lonely, food to the hungry, and alms to the poor. But by this time the kings of Europe had begun to exploit religion, and religious differences, to build up their own dynastic power. Religious minorities like the Jews, and dissenters, were all subjected to cruel persecutions. And the positive side of spiritual life had generally been forgotten in favor of all that can go wrong with religion.

Inside the monastery, it wasn’t all that different. The five remaining monks were divided into four factions. Many things didn’t get done because the four were always waiting for one of the others to do it. None of them would willingly help out with tasks that had been assigned to a brother monk. The abbot had almost given in to despair.

Then one morning, at prayer, the abbot began wondering the old rabbi who sometimes took refuge from pogroms in the city at a little disuse hermitage in the woods nearby. Something told him that the rabbi just might understand his own despair. So that day, the abbot slipped out to visit the old rabbi, who welcomed him to his hut, and commiserated with him. “I know how it is,” he said. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in the city. Almost no one comes to the *schul* anymore.” So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read together from the 40th chapter of prophet Isaiah, and quietly talked and prayed together. When the time came for the abbot to leave for the evening service of compline, they embraced each other and wept.

"It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years, " the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying community?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is this: among you is the Meshiach ben David, the one we have all been waiting for." After prayers the abbot told his brothers where he'd been and what the rabbi had said. "He couldn't help much," the abbot answered. "We just wept, read scripture, and prayed together. But as I was leaving, he said the most remarkable thing: that the Messiah is one of us. He must be crazy with worry for his own people."

Yet in the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks kept pondering the rabbi's words. Could it be true? But who could the rabbi have meant? Was it the Abbot, the obvious leader? But hardly a perfect one. Or perhaps Brother Philip, the liturgical leader of their prayers and chants. But so out of it! So otherworldly! Or could it be Brother Eldred, the practical one, who sees to community finances. But he's so crotchety! Not very generous – although, when you stop to think about it, he's almost always right, and concerned for all of us together. Or Brother Thomas? well named, such a skeptic, impatient, even blasphemous – although, when you stop to think about him, when you really need someone, there he is, appearing next to you, as though by magic. Maybe he's the Messiah!

Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me; he couldn't possibly have meant me! I'm just an ordinary, unworthy member of this poor community; and yet . . . yet suppose he did. Suppose I am the one who is called to bring good news to the poor, to make the deaf to hear, the blind to see again, the lame to walk, to set the captives free? No, no . . . not me. It must be someone else.

And as they contemplated in this way, the monks began to treat each other differently. With new respect; with hope; with expectation, on the off chance that that other just might be the one they had been waiting for. They began to treat themselves that way, too.

Because of where the monastery was located, people still came to visit on occasion – whether to join in a service in the old chapel, or just to see the grounds. When they did, they began to sense a new spirit in the old monks - one of mutual respect, renewed hope. Kindness. And they felt drawn to keep coming back. They began to bring friends to visit the place. And their friends brought their friends. Not everyone felt inclined to join the community, but then one of the younger men who came actually did ask if he could be a novice. And then another, and another. And soon, within a few years, the monastery was again a thriving community, and a spiritual center for the whole region -- all because of the rabbi's gift.

Are you the One who is to come? The Hasids taught, “Always assume that *the one next to you is the Messiah*, just waiting for a sign from you finally to reveal himself” - or herself. As Rabbi Hillel said, “If not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, then when?”

“We live in an unredeemed world,” said Buber, “but out of each human soul that is truly free and generous, a seed of redemption falls into the world. And the harvest is divine. God waits for humankind.”

In the final scene of his play, *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett has the main character play his part in wheelchair, as though representing the crippled condition of today's humankind. He keeps his ancestors in garbage cans, to show our contempt for the wisdom of the past. And at the very end, he suddenly hurtles his wheelchair to the edge of the stage with skid, and shrieks, “Now get out of here,” he roars at the audience. And then, with tears rolling, adds, “And love one another.”

That's what we are waiting for, my friends. We are the ones we've been waiting for. Amen.

