

December 3, 2006

“Measured Anticipation”

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This is a sermon about waiting. I begin by confessing that I do not much like what I am about to say. Waiting is not one of my strong points. I keep telling myself that patience is a virtue; but keep acting with devilish impatience. So this is a mirror sermon—a soliloquy. To be patient or to hurry, that is the question. I invite you to eavesdrop on Jim’s sermon to Jim.

I need Advent. I need this reminder at least once a year that things cannot be hurried. I need this four weeks of preparation. I need to open the little windows on the Advent calendar one at a time rather than all at once. Advent says, “be still, wait, take your time.” Advent is a reminder that there is a calendar in the affairs of humanity which cannot be controlled. Advent is four candles, but lighted one each week for four long weeks before the Christmas candle is lighted. Advent is an event in learning to wait; and learning to appreciate waiting.

Well, yes, Jim, but when is waiting nothing more than wasting? When is waiting nothing more than an excuse to avoid involvement? When is that old axiom, “Whoever hesitates is lost!” really true?

Then I remember procrastination is sometimes only laziness. “The road to Hades is paved with good intentions.” Yet, what should one do? You say the world is afire, but some vain attempts to extinguish the blaze have only added fuel. There are perils of impatience. “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

The axioms are contradictory. “Haste makes waste!” yes, but “Whoever hesitates is lost!” And so the conversation goes. Every step of the pilgrimage is freighted with decisions: wait or act? Now or next week? The conversation is even found in sacred texts: “Now is the day of salvation!” or “Be still and know!”

Henri Nouwen is my teacher. Nouwen says that just one of the problems of our activist society is impatience. In our desperate need to experience some high—religious or otherwise—we are too prone to construct our own events. We do not like to wait, so we attempt to manipulate time. Nouwen writes about some new age spiritual practices:

“Our inclination to put faith in any suggestion that promises quick healing is so great that it is not surprising that spiritual experiences are mushrooming all over the place and have become highly sought after commercial items. ...In our impatient culture, it has indeed become extremely difficult to see much salvation in waiting. (Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p.92)

Your problem, Jim, is that you are impatient with *kairos*, the Greek word for the time of ripening, you favor *chronos*, the Greek word for clock time. If you are not careful you will attempt to fabricate religious experience which is long on sweetness and light but short on substance.

I think my problem is not unique. I realize there is danger in generalizing from the specific, but I think impatience is one mark of our culture. Part of the reason is failure of trust. The Centering Thought for this service is from Simone Weil: “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.”

Waiting patiently requires willingness to trust. When we do not trust we do not wait patiently. When we do not trust, we become active, then hyper-active. After all, we've been taught "one gets what one deserves." So we translate that into spiritual experience and attempt to choreograph Christmas by rushing through Advent.

The "Silent Night" of waiting in the "Little Town of Bethlehem" may be okay for some people; but we need all the tinsel and all the glitter of artificial Christmas trees to assure ourselves that it really is Christmas.

If we are going to perceive, much less accept the gift that comes "how silently, how silently" we must not drown out silence with Muzak carols. The only way to perceive the light of Christmas or the eight candles of the Menorah is waiting in the darkness. Stars only shine at night, which may well be a symbol of waiting. I need the measured anticipation of Advent if I am to know the joy of Christmas.

So, I've about convinced myself of the importance of patience, and then the other me asks, "But Jim, suppose I agree not only with the necessity but the benefits of waiting. What should I be doing while waiting? Is it possible to be without doing?"

When I am at my best self, I can respond to that question with an example from the Hebrew scripture. It comes from the time the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon. They waited seventy long years. They could not sing: "by the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept!" You can imagine their plaintive cries: "We thought we had a covenant with God; has God forsaken us?" or "We thought we were the 'chosen people' did that mean chosen to be in captivity in Babylon?"

It is precisely out of this experience of waiting—out of this "dark night" of the "Jewish soul" that Advent was born. You can find the story in the final part of the book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some unknown preacher or prophet, took the name of Isaiah, and began to encourage the captive Israelites. He talked about comfort and tried to remind them that something good is about to happen. Then this marvelous couplet:

 "...they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall
 mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,
 they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

I am well aware that quoting scripture in a Unitarian Universalist sermon is not usually done. Indeed, someone might suggest, "You can take the boy out of the Baptist Church, but you can't take the Baptist out of the boy!" I'm not real sure why some Unitarian Universalists will be content with *Zorba theGreek* but not Isaiah. But, that's a sermon for another day.

The point just now—the point of both "Zorba" and Isaiah, and the point that Jim needs to convince Jim is that the only way for strength to be renewed is by waiting. For Jim—dare I say for all of us—the message is the same. Our frustration and exhaustion, our frenetic lifestyles can be eased. Our strength really will be renewed if we will take time to wait.

What is the character of that kind of strength-renewal waiting? Seems to me the key is to wait expectantly. Let our waiting be pregnant with possibilities. Someone told me about a shoemaker who doubled his business by changing one word in his advertising. His sign read: "Shoes repaired while you wait." Nobody wanted to wait. So he changed the sign to read: "Shoes repaired while you watch." and business doubled. Watching with expectant hope is a creative use of waiting. Impatient with waiting? Try watching.

If we will allow it, Advent can provide a model for beneficial waiting. Did you notice the word “if?” If we will allow it... We all know the contemporary trend to rush the season. The Thanksgiving feast is only a menu, but the Christmas decorations are already up in the stores. The measured anticipation of Advent becomes the frenzy of commercialism: “Only 20 more shopping days until Christmas!”

In his marvelous Advent-Christmas play, W.H. Auden has these few lines:

“The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all. For the innocent children who whisper so excitedly outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be, grew up when it opened.”

Auden continues:

“And craving the sensation but ignoring the cause, we look around for something, no matter what, to inhibit our self-reflection.”
(W.H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” final scene)

Auden is using the experience of children so impatient to discover the contents of the carefully wrapped gifts that they miss the joy of anticipation; using that to remind us that we can easily miss or inhibit beneficial self-reflection which comes through waiting in expectation.

Having already broken the unspoken taboo about quoting scripture—using the Hebrew Bible a few minutes ago. Here now is a reference to a passage from the Christian scripture. Almost everyone knows the great “Love Chapter” of Paul, used in many weddings, including Unitarian Universalist weddings. You may remember the chapter which begins “Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels..>” and concludes with “Now abides faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.” That text is well known, and well used.

There is another text which is not so well known. It is a great paean to hope. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes about hope...about waiting expectantly with hope. He writes about suffering—the Jesus followers in Rome were suffering—and concludes that section by talking about waiting in hope:

“Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:25)

I don’t know if I have convinced my impatient self, nor if I have said anything helpful to you. I do know even when I do not practice what I preach, at least one possibility for this four week period of Advent is learning the importance of waiting. Advent could be a time to re-order our lives for all the rest of the year by learning the importance of patience.

Antoine de St. Exupery instructs all of us when his *Little Prince* says, “It is the time you have wasted on your rose which makes it important.” Winter Solstice and Hanukkah and Kwanza and Christmas will be only as important as the time we have “wasted” in measured anticipation throughout this season. Perhaps one good response to the question often asked, “Are you ready for the Holidays?” maybe one good response would be, “Yes, I’m waiting.”