



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Wait and See

Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

We should be pretty good at waiting. After all, as children we are trained to wait in almost every circumstance. Our parents tell us to wait patiently for Santa Claus, our next birthday, or the trip to the beach. We have to wait until we are old enough to drive, mature enough to stay at home alone, and responsible enough to get a car. Of course there is always that dreaded "Wait until your father (or mother) gets home! We are taught to wait from an early age.

As adults the circumstances change, but we continue to wait nonetheless. We wait until the car is paid off, the Christmas bills are paid, and the roof is replaced. We wait for our children to be born and then we wait until they walk or become potty trained or get big enough to do some things for themselves. We wait for our children to graduate from college, to get a job, to become self sufficient. Then we wait for our next promotion or new job or big break. We wait on parents. We wait on spouses. We wait on our dreams. We do a lot of waiting.

You would think we would be pretty good at waiting, but we are not, are we? We like to get things done now. We want some answers now. We want to figure out life now! We want to move on to the next thing now. We are a lot like the five-year-old boy who went to a church conference with his parents. He kept asking when they could go to lunch and his dad kept telling him he had to wait. The next time he asked, his mother handed him a pad and pencil and suggested he mark down every time the speaker said the word "and." After a while, the little fellow grew bored again, and his dad asked, "Would you like to listen for a different word?" "Yes," he whispered. "I'd like to listen for 'Amen.'" A lot of would like to hear an "amen" every once in a while so that we could move on to something else.

God, on the other hand, seems to have a great deal of patience. Jesus spent a lot of time trying to help his disciples understand the way God acts in the world. On one occasion, he told them this parable:

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

You have to wonder what in the world Jesus was thinking when he told this parable. The Israelites were an oppressed people, pinched under the thumb of Rome. Every ill that we experience today was in play in first century Palestine. Surely the people were asking why doesn't God do something?! Isn't that often a question we ask after watching the evening news or reading the morning paper or scrolling through the latest news feed? Why doesn't God root evil out of the world and return it to the safe and pristine condition he originally intended? Why doesn't God just get rid of all the people who do horrible things in the world? How dare Jesus suggest that we wait like the little boy in church, keeping our minds occupied with inane activities? Let's pronounce the "Amen" and get on with restoring God's world!

But wait, Jesus says. Do you want God to get rid of all the evil in the world or just some of it? If you want God to get rid of all the evil, remember that evil resides in each and every one of us as well as in the perpetrators of terror, abuse, and injustice of every kind. If God eliminates all evil in one fell swoop, might you and I also be caught up in that fateful harvest?

Or, if you prefer that God pick and choose the evil to eliminate, which evil and where? Is God likely to visit vengeance upon the evil I suffer but not yours? How should God pick and choose? And what if our ideas of good and evil differ, what if you call one thing evil and I call it good?¹ What does God do then? If you think such discrepancies are impossible within the family of faith, remember slavery, civil rights, voting rights for women, women in ministry, even which translation of the Bible is acceptable. Each of those issues and more have been debated, preached about, and fought over as a matter of good against evil. Which weeds will God pull out first?

Jesus told his followers a parable about waiting and a story about God. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away,” Jesus said. God is like a farmer, a good farmer, a careful farmer. When he tilled his field and planted his seed, he sat back and said, “It is good!” and waited for the harvest. But bad things happen to good souls—even to God. Someone sabotaged his crop. Does anything like that ever happen today? Some farmers feud with their neighbors because pesticides designed for genetically modified crops drift into regular fields and damage their crops. Trade secrets are stolen and applied to rival products. Personal financial information is hacked and identities are stolen and financial ruin ensues. Do we stop developing new technologies? Do we get rid of electronic communication? Do we fire any and everyone who potentially has access to classified information? Do we condemn everyone who has ever sinned?

“Wait for the harvest,” Jesus advises. Sometimes it is difficult to discern between good and evil. Sometimes our judgment may be wrong and in our zeal to rid the world of something bad, we harm a lot of folks who are good. God may not be finished with his creation. God may still be working with me or you or someone else. Be patient and let the healthy crop and the weeds mature so that we learn to distinguish between the two. Let the wheat grow

¹This perspective on God’s patience is informed by N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1-15* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 167-174.

so that it can be harvested lest we destroy it and eliminate our source for bread and livelihood. Wait and let us see what happens.

God is patient. Like the waiting father in the parable of the Lost Son, God waits to see if we will come to ourselves and return home. The father waited, though he worried about his younger son. He waited and rejoiced when he returned alive. He also waited for the impatient and jealous older son who felt cheated although he received exactly what was promised him. The father waited for the older son to come to himself, recognize his father's unfailing love, rejoice that his brother was alive, and join the party. He may still be waiting, but wait he does.

If you want good examples of God's patience, read through the Old Testament, especially the book of Genesis. From the story of Adam and Eve playing hide and seek with God in the garden to Abraham's call to go into a new land to the enslavement of the Hebrew people and beyond, God waits. And hardly is there a better of example of a weed that later produces a good harvest than Jacob.

Jacob was the second-born son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, father of the twelve tribes of Israel. In the story we heard earlier, Jacob had camped for the night. He was on the run because he had cheated his older twin Esau out of his inheritance and deceived his blind father. He was named Jacob because he was born right behind his brother, actually holding onto Esau's heel as he entered the world. His name meant "heel-sneak" or "trickster." He was a scoundrel who would do anything or say anything to get his way and gain advantage over someone else, even his own kin. When Esau realized what Jacob had done, he wanted to pull up that little weed of a man. He wanted to exterminate the vermin that was his brother. He wanted to eliminate the evil that had infected his family.

Yet, the story does not go that way. Although God clearly does not favor deceit and theft, obviously does not approve of cheating one's brother and abusing the trust of one's father, God nevertheless allows Jacob to escape. In fact, as Jacob lies down to rest in the wilderness, God blesses him, promises to make of him a great nation, and says, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:15).

That is not the tone of an irate farmer furious that his crop has been compromised. Those are not the words we expect from a Creator-God whose plan to use a certain group of people to share his grace throughout the world has just been co-opted by a greedy and insecure scoundrel like Jacob. No, but they are the words of a loving and patient God who claims us as his children. Instead of destroying Jacob as he slept with a rock for a pillow, God gave him pleasant dreams of blessing and protection. Go figure!

Wait and see what I will do with Jacob, God insists. And we watch. We see him learn patience himself as his Uncle Laban, trickster-par-excellence, makes him work a total of fourteen years to marry Rachel and her sister Leah. We watch Jacob grow into a skilled farmer and herdsman, a good father and provider. He never quite loses his ability to get one up on someone else, especially his uncle, but he does mature into a thoughtful, upright, caring man. He and God continually wrestle which culminates in a all night grudge match from which he limps away with a new name—Israel. His sons give birth to the twelve tribes of Israel and Jesus eventually is born to save the world.

Had God simply eliminated Jacob because of the evil he had done, the story would not have unfolded in the way God desired. If God had not been patient, Jacob would not have had the opportunity to make amends for what he had done, restore his relationship with his brother, and become the conduit of God's grace that he was. If God had not waited, the story—our story—might be quite different.

The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a patient and waiting farmer who knows his crop better than anyone and understands that timing is important in all things. Sometimes it is best to wait and see what God will do. Who knows, you or I might just be another Jacob whom God is hoping will come to himself, turn around, and come home to the father who is anxiously awaiting our return. Maybe, just maybe, God's patience will be our salvation. And now the word for which we have been waiting. The one with which we affirm what God is doing in our lives. The word which sends us into service: Amen. So be it! Thanks be to God!

July 23, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Like Jacob awakening to a fresh dawn, we too realize that we are not alone but are wrapped in the comforting grace of your presence, O God. We realize that what lies behind us is past and what yet awaits us is gift. So we sing joyfully this morning of your goodness and grace toward us.

Thank you for the many ways, stunning and almost imperceptible, that we have experienced your kindness this week past. For unexpected greetings from friends, for meals that nourished and pleased us, for good rest, for comfort in the midst of sorrow, for the beauty of flowers that brighten our world, and for the gift of loved ones who bring beauty into our lives, we thank you, O God. Your kindness toward us is astounding.

We pray for our community and its opportunities and needs. Guide us as together we build toward a better and secure future. Thank you for the people who preceded us, who offered their insight and gifts to make life here good for us all. During these past few weeks, we have said goodbye to many people whose lives were integral to the life of our community. For their lives we are grateful and for their families we offer our comfort and support.

We pray for our neighbors who may not feel supported or protected and who may not see the opportunities we do. Lead us to find ways to come together and help one another. Enable us to bring an end to the violence that is stealing young lives. Give us the courage to follow Christ to those places in need of the help that we can give.

We pray for each one who is ill, O God, and in need of healing and cure. Make your presence known to them and bless the gifts of medical care to deliver the help they need. Bless all caretakers who give time, skill, energy, and gifts of the heart to make us comfortable and remind us that we are loved. Provide guidance and strength and help to all who call upon you, we pray.

We sing because our faith cannot be contained in words alone, O God. We are joyful because we know we are not alone. We celebrate because we know that you are not finished with us and the rest of your creation. We love you because you have loved us first. We offer our praise and thanksgiving through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.