

## When Longing Becomes Promise

A sermon by John Strommen on Isaiah 42:1-9 Dec. 16, 2018

Advent is a season of waiting. Waiting for God to be with us, waiting for God's will to be done, waiting for you, me and our neighbor to be made whole after this world has had its way with us.

The lesson from Isaiah today is called a "servant song," one of four in Isaiah that paints a vivid picture of God's servant who is coming and what that servant will do. As our lesson from Isaiah is read, what phrase speaks to you as you sit here waiting? Circle it.

### Isaiah 42:1-9

*1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. 5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8 I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.*

What did you circle? (take responses)

When I consider what people in this life have to face, I think for many of us, waiting doesn't quite capture how we feel because it's too passive. We *long* for an answer, we *long* for things to be made right. We long for an answer to a loved one's mental illness, or for our neighbor kids who live in a broken home, or for the people on the outside looking in waiting for justice to come to them.

In *West Side Story*, there is a terrible night when animosities boil over between the very white gang that was there first, and the darker skinned Puerto Rican gang trying to establish themselves as immigrants in a New York City. Well, all hell breaks loose and two people are killed, which greatly complicates things for the star crossed lovers Tony and Maria, one Anglo, the other Puerto Rican, as they realize their future together is almost impossible in this world. But as they process things, they are swept up in hope and longing for "somewhere." Enjoy this film clip of "Somewhere":

*There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us  
Peace and quiet and open air wait for us somewhere  
There's a time for us, someday a time for us  
Time together with time to spare, time to learn, time to care*

*Someday, somewhere  
We'll find a new way of living  
We'll find a way of forgiving  
Somewhere*

*Someplace for us, a time and place for us  
Hold my hand and we're halfway there  
Hold my hand and I'll take you there*

*Somehow, someday*

*We'll find a new way of living, we'll find a way of forgiving.* Isn't this heart rending, this description of a place where there is forgiveness and peace? Tony and Maria can almost see this place, can't they, and they hope against hope that their love can take them there.

It's all very much like the beautiful phrase from Isaiah: "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them." Here too is envisioned a place where things are new, where justice is realized for the marginalized, where the blind can see, the prisoners are set free, the vulnerable are treated tenderly. But in this case we will get there not by holding hands, but by the declaration of God, whose love spans past, present and future.

Isaiah's servant song asks, "what if *somewhere* was a promise?" Verses like these have always been thought by Christians to describe Jesus. Nothing more so than the suffering servant passages in Isaiah 53, where it says, "*But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*"

God's promise is that *somewhere* will come true in Jesus of Nazareth.

How can God promise something like this? Because Jesus bore the weight of all the things that destroy this world: fear, greed, hatred, domination, death. Jesus bore the weight, willingly, and allowed these very things to crush the very life out of him, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was raised again, thus breaking the power of fear, greed, hatred, domination, death. You see, he took the full brunt of these forces that diminish and destroy life, and he rose again, nonetheless, thus bringing forth a new thing: a world based on love, restoration and healing. On life.

And yet...in this life, let's get real. We wait and we wait. God's promise is, in some respects, unfulfilled. My brother Peter preached on the laments two weeks ago, finding yourself in a dark tunnel where you can't see the light at the end. This is a common experience for us this side of the kingdom. There is so much waiting, and longing. Heidi and I know someone who developed a serious illness and her family abandoned her. Now she's alone.

Our longing is returned to us as a promise, God's way of saying, "it will be done." It is guaranteed in Jesus, and yet...it is nowhere near fruition. We can only experience such promises in part, in glimpses. So, God's promise is partly about *what is* to come. We're not there yet. We must wait.

But God also promises to be with us, and so he is through Jesus, fully and completely, *now*. For this, we do not wait. For those of us who feel we go it alone or do not belong or that we do not have the support to make it through, consider this story:

I had a friend who has since died who grew up in multiple foster homes, usually no more than one or two years at a time. Do you think he wondered if he would ever belong? Do you think Keith was waiting, longing? He was.

But Keith had a unique experience when he went to bed at night as boy of 8 or 9 years old: he would lie in bed and imagine that he was pushing off on a raft. But once he was out floating down the river, he was joined by someone: God. No, God was not visible, but was very real. Real enough so they could have a conversation that would go on and on as the raft meandered down the river. This was a regular bedtime ritual for Keith, and one could say understandable enough for a lonely boy like him to create an imaginary friend.

Where did God come from? None of Keith's foster parents took him to church. Where did he get this idea? Was it just imaginary? As this little boy waited for a permanent family and mom and dad; as he longed for the companionship of someone who would reliably be there for him, Keith imagined his own "somewhere," but this somewhere turned into a promise. You see, I believe that God showing up was more than just Keith's imagination. This kid who had no reason to think God was real, believed it anyway. In the Bible, we often read about God speaking to people, appearing to people in dreams and visions. Well, for Keith, this was part dream, part vision, and it was God who was speaking. And when he was a few years older, one day Keith walked into a local church and signed up for their confirmation program.

The answer is so clear: Keith was a bruised reed God did not break, a dimly burning wick he did not quench.

Eventually, years later, Keith went on to become a pastor. For four years I was privileged to work with Keith Friese, the senior pastor of Mt Olivet Lutheran Church.

I tell you of this because we long for things like healing, reconciliation in our lives, unity and peace in our world. And we wait for the second coming of Christ when these things will be fulfilled. But what we don't have to wait for is the servant who has already come and is on our life raft with us. Jesus, God in the flesh, is with us and closer than we can imagine. And no matter what we are going through, this is good news indeed. Somewhere is a promise and it is *now*. Amen.