

Blessing the Path
A Sermon by Rev. Heather Concannon
December 3, 2017

Reading:

Blessing for Waiting
by Jan Richardson

Who wait
for the night
to end
bless them.

Who wait
for the night
to begin
bless them.

Who wait
in the hospital room
who wait
in the cell
who wait
in prayer
bless them.

Who wait
for news
who wait
for the phone call
who wait
for a word

who wait
for a job
a house
a child
bless them.

Who wait
for one who
will come home
who wait
for one who
will not come home
bless them.

Who wait with fear
who wait with joy
who wait with peace
who wait with rage
who wait for the end
who wait for the beginning
who wait alone
who wait together
bless them.

Who wait
without knowing
what they wait for
or why
bless them.

Who wait
when they
should not wait
who wait
when they should be
in motion
who wait
when they need
to rise
who wait
when they need
to set out
bless them.

Who wait
for the end
of waiting
who wait
for the fullness
of time
who wait
emptied and
open and
ready
who wait
for you
O bless.

Sermon:

It was the Christmas season of 1995
And my younger sister was crystal clear about
Her one, singular desire that Christmas.
If you've seen "A Christmas Story", think Ralphie's Red Rider BB Gun level of focus and
desire.
Her object of obsession?
An "Oopsie Daisy" motorized doll that crawled on its own.
The commercials would come on
And she would be rapt with attention
In a way I had never seen her focus so much on a commercial,
Clear that she wanted that Oopsie Daisy doll and nothing else for Christmas that year.
Clear that *nothing* would make her doll collection more complete
Than this "realistic" baby doll.

Our parents, of course, had other ideas about how this might play out.
They tried to reason with her
"Amy, don't you think, maybe, you can pretend to have your current dolls crawl?"
No. Absolutely not.
"Is it possible that you *might* not like it as much as you think you will?"
Nope, not possible, parents.
So in the end, they saw her four-year-old heart was set on this doll
And they got it, even though they almost never got us things that we saw on TV,
And even though it ate up most of what they had budgeted for for Christmas that year.

On Christmas morning, my sister opened her presents
And the joy on her face—she had actually gotten an Oopsie Daisy doll!
She was going to be as happy and cool as the girls on TV—
her joy was palpable.
And as soon as she could,
Almost without glancing at her other presents
She got my parents to cut off the zip ties,
Remove it from its cardboard jail,
Put batteries into the doll
And she started playing with it.

And I remember watching her, playing with her in our playroom
As the crushing disappointment became clearer and clearer.
This doll was not cuddly.
It was made of hard, cold plastic.
It was not realistic, it made a motorized *swish—swish—swish* sound as it crawled.
And it was not charming, either
It had this weird habit of splaying out—that's why it was called "Oopsie Daisy", after all—
and falling on the floor and playing the recording of a baby crying and saying "Maa-maa!
Maa-maa!" in a way that sounded more like a sheep bleating than like a small human child.

My sister was devastated.
That was her one, big present that year.
She had gotten what she asked for,
What she had spent weeks begging and longing for,
And she didn't like it.
Oopsie Daisy has not instantly made her into that happy, joyful girl she saw on TV.
In the end, Oopsie Daisy got precisely one hour of play time in our house.

Social psychologists in the 1970s
Coined the term "hedonic treadmill"
Which likens the pursuit of happiness to a person on a treadmill,
Where you have to keep walking just to stay in the same place.
The hedonic treadmill, in this theory,
Is the observed tendency of humans
to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness
despite major positive or negative events in their life.
Basically, this theory suggests that long-term happiness is not significantly impacted by
events, achieving goals, making more money, or getting that Oopsie Daisy doll you really
think you want.

I share this because I fall into the trap of the hedonic treadmill
All the time.
I have noticed in my own self talk, over the years
Narratives that goes something like this:
"Well, Heather, once you finish the semester,
or get through the holidays,
or catch up on emails,
find a new hobby,
take the car to the garage,
finish the to-do list,
have a job that pays a salary,
go on vacation,
get a cat,
replace your falling apart winter coat
you name it, you get my point—
then you'll be happy, then you'll be able to relax, then you'll be living the life you've always
wanted, then you'll be self-actualized."
Then. Then. Then.
Always in the future.
Does this sound like any of you?
Do you hear yourself saying these kinds of things to yourself?

Because let me tell you, friends.
I have actually done all of these things at some point.
I've gone on vacation and found hobbies and my car is currently running fine,
But my life is not magically different than it was before all of these things.

Today Advent begins, in the Christian calendar,

And as we move into the holiday season, I've been particularly focused on the idea of waiting

And I've been thinking about the spiritual gifts that waiting has to offer.

Because I think that that hedonic treadmill has an element of waiting, right?

And we are waiting for all kinds of things.

Waiting for more money

Or waiting for time to rest

Or waiting for a different living situation

Or waiting to hear about news

Or waiting to see loved ones

Waiting for a time when we have more time on our hands

Waiting for a world that isn't as violent

And cruel

Waiting to be happy

Waiting for fulfillment

Waiting for the day when love guides us

And not fear

Waiting for healing, salvation,

Waiting for the light to come back

Waiting for a future that will always be slightly beyond our reach.

Advent, in the Christian tradition

Is the waiting for Jesus's birth

Jesus, who would be the symbol of God's love and salvation

Jesus, who symbolizes bringing of God's kingdom and peace to the world.

And though, for me, I understand Jesus to be a human who embodied God's love so beautifully and profoundly that the Empire took notice,

I know I am waiting for that world that our hearts know is possible

For the world we can hear breathing, if we are quiet, just beyond the noise and lights,

That world where love and justice guide our lives and our communities,

And not greed or fear or profit or hate.

I am certainly waiting.

There is a word for theologies of the future

And that word is *eschatology*

Meaning the study of final things

Or where humanity is ultimately going.

And unlike some theological traditions that tend to place

The hope for salvation in an afterlife

Progressive religious traditions tend to place a focus on this life, this earth

Here and now,

Saying the most that we can know of heaven or hell is here on earth

And that it matters what we do in our lives not because of some eternal punishment that may be awaiting us

But because of the ways that we create heaven and hell through our own actions

In this life, here on earth.

So, folks... welcome to Hell!

And, also, welcome to Heaven.

Rebecca Parker, a Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, says that there are three major eschatologies in Unitarian Universalist theology, which can each be summed up in a sentence.

They are social gospel eschatology, which says that “We are here to build the kingdom of God on earth”.

Then there is universalist eschatology, which says that “God intends all souls to be saved”. And radically realized eschatology, which says that “paradise is here and now”.

Radically realized eschatology says that we are already standing on holy ground, and that we need not wait for another life, or even a future time when justice and love reign.

Rebecca Parker writes,

“Our framework of meaning can begin with appreciative and compassionate attention to *this* world, rather than imagining an ideal *other* world. Our first prayer can be one of thanks. Instead of striving to get somewhere else, our goal can be to fully arrive here and greet each day of life with gratitude, expressing hospitality for the mysterious goodness that is new every morning and engaging in compassionate care for the present realities of suffering, injury, and injustice that call for our active response.” (A House for Hope, p14)

She continues, “to say paradise is accessible here and now is not to say the world is perfect or that we should focus on the good and deny the evil and pain around and within us... paradise is a place of struggle, a place where suffering happens and where destructive systems that harm life have to be resisted. But... we can live at home in the world, knowing this is enough. A sense of enough is critical now, because anxiety over not enough drives the exploitation and greed that threaten the earth’s ecosystems and puts cultures and lives at risk around the globe.” (A House for Hope, p 15)

And finally, “we come to know this world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth. Generosity and mutual care

are the pathways into knowing that paradise is here and now.
This way of living is not utopian.
It does not spring from the imagination of a better world,
but from a profound embrace of this world.
It brings hope home to today,
to this moment and its possibilities for faithful love.” (A House for Hope, p 16)

When we are waiting for a world that is not yet,
But sometimes miss that we are already living our lives.
Here, now, in this world, in this moment.
Perhaps it is less about waiting for our lives to become something else,
And more, as Buddhist philosophy would suggest,
About waking up to our lives.
Because all of these things we might be waiting and hoping for
The good, the bad, the things to be excited about, the things to be grateful for, the suffering,
the great joy
All of life—is already present right now.
This moment is rich and juicy.

A warm Friday afternoon last April
Found me walking slowly, slowly down the hill near my house
To the ice cream store
That just opened
To get ice cream with my two of my housemates
One my nine-month pregnant housemate
Whose water had broken the night before
But contractions hadn't started yet.
Talk about a period of waiting.
And between calls with their midwife
And wrapping up last minute things
We went for a walk, hoping that would help active labor come more quickly.
And the baby's dad and I stress-vacuumed their car
And installed the car seat
And hauled stuff out of the basement that we had meant to remove months ago,
Because what else is there to do with all that anticipatory energy?

And in my anticipation and waiting and hopeful anxiety
I almost missed those moments
The last moments with my housemates before their baby came
The warm sun on our faces
The joy of making up silly songs about waddling and labor
The companionship of a shared project
The satisfaction of spring cleaning.
Life was happening, then and there,
even as we were waiting for something big we all knew was about to happen.

Advent, then, is a time of active waiting,
Present waiting.

In Hebrew, the word for *wait* is also the exact same word for *hope*.
And waiting, like hope, is not passive.
In the waiting, we work to prepare a world that is ready for transformation, and salvation
We work to create the world
to prepare the room in the inn
And in doing that work while we wait
We are actually living into that salvation and that hope.
By revealing and uncovering the ways that it has always been here
Right in front of us,
If we allow ourselves to become the ones we have been waiting for.
There is blessing in the work
When we find heaven, paradise, salvation, healing in the work itself.

So, dear friends,
As we move into this season of waiting
And anticipation,
Whether you are eagerly waiting for Christmas morning
Or you are waiting for the holidays to be over
Or somewhere in between,
Let us also bless the path,
The now,
The journey.
For too often we only bless the end
We only say thank you
when we've reached the destination.

May we find ourselves present to the moments we are in
Waking up to our lives
Today, here and now.
May it be so, and amen.

“Active waiting means to be fully present in the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is the moment”- Henri Nouwen