

Wait Training

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Isaiah 40:1-11, 28-31

Do you have the time?

It may be one of the simplest and hardest questions we ever get asked. Do you have the time? Lord knows we have watches and phones and computers to help us answer that question down to the millisecond. Do you have the time? Yes, 9:24 and 13 seconds by my atomic watch. Easy answer. But how about this ... Do you have the time to sit for a while? Do you have the time to stop for a while? Do you have the time to wait for a while? Not such an easy answer.

Author John Locke tells of hearing from a man in Great Britain who told of a time when he and family took a little hike. He and his wife and daughter. And as they were hiking the daughter kept stopping to pick white dandelions and blow on them to see the little white petals fly through the air. The mother was intent on keeping up with the hike and so she kept on trying to keep her daughter moving along telling her that there was no time for blowing dandelions. “No time for blowing dandelions,” she kept saying to her little girl. And after about three times of hearing her mother telling her there was no time for blowing dandelions ... the little girl asked, “Mommy, what then is time for?”

What then is time for?

A week into the Advent season and with less than three weeks until Christmas it is an appropriate question to ask, I suppose. What is the time for? This

season in which we mark off our Advent calendars in preparation for the coming of the King. We read our advent devotionals one day at a time. But were we not tempted to read ahead? I bet many of us read ahead. Probably because we don't want to wait. We don't want to wait until the next day. We don't want to wait, I suppose, because we don't want to think about what the time is for. In fact, it's around this time that we start asking our friends and family the Christmas question, “Are you ready for Christmas?” In other words, are you done waiting and are you ready? We want to use the season as efficiently as possible so if we can get it all done and not have to wait – all the better. If we can squeeze a month into a week, super. Because we are time driven, right? No generation in the course of human history has been more time driven. No generation in the course of human history is able to do more things in less time than the generations that live in this moment of time. We can do more things in the course of an hour than what people in the 14th century could do in the course of a week. And yet, our biggest complaint is that we don't have any time.

Because time is precious. Every segment of time is precious. I have heard it put this way: If you want to know the value of one year ... ask a student whose been held back a grade. If you want to know the value of one month, ask an expectant mother at 34 weeks who is feeling labor pains. If you want to know the value of one week ask the editor of a weekly magazine. If you want to know the value of one day ask the editor of a daily newspaper. If you want to know the value of one minute ask a person who missed the train. If you want to know the value of one second ask a person who just avoided an accident.

If you want to know the value of one millisecond ask the swimmer who was touched out for the gold in the Olympics.

Time is precious.

“What then is time for?” asked the little girl.

So Advent would make us ask what if time was for waiting? Now I don't know about you, but I don't like that question. I have never liked that question. I don't like that question because I hate what the answer might be. In fact if time is for waiting – then that would be another proof that God's thoughts are not my thoughts and God's ways are not my ways. Because I don't like to wait. Do you like to wait? Who wants to wait?

Who wants to wait for test results from the hospital?

Who wants to wait in three miles of traffic?

Who wants to wait to hear from their college of choice?

Who wants to wait to get better from an illness?

Who wants to wait at the checkout counter at the grocery store?

Who wants to wait to hear back from a job interview?

Who wants to wait while your loved one is in surgery?

Who wants to wait?

So the Israelites were waiting. You may remember their story. The people of God had been sacked by the northern kingdom of Babylon and the Babylonians had captured the Israelites and dragged them back to their own land and there the people of God lived in exile. Strangers in a foreign land. And there they lived for years. And they waited. They waited and they waited and they waited. And in their waiting they couldn't be sure that God or Babylon was going to let them have their land back. They just waited. They just waited for things to somehow get better. And then finally God decides to speak and he says to his prophet Isaiah, “Comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her and tell her that her punishment has been paid and her sin has been forgiven. Prepare the way of the Lord. Tell my people that as they wait God is up to something.” It's the Advent hope, isn't it? That as we wait God is up to something? The Advent hope opens our eyes to look about and wonder what might God be up to in my waiting? What might God be up to in my waiting? “Have you not seen?” Isaiah asks, “Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God ... the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable.

“...if Advent is to tell us anything it tells us that our waiting is for God and God alone.”

And those who wait for this 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.”

You see, those who believe that God is up to something in the waiting, that God is preparing something in the waiting, that God is enough to hope for in their waiting ... it is these who shall renew their strength. It's this hopeful waiting. Hope not in some particular outcome. Hope not in some particular result. Hope just in the waiting. Because Lord knows God is up to something. And it is in my waiting for this up to something God that gives me strength.

John Claypool was an Episcopal priest and in the early part of his ministry his daughter was found to have leukemia ... a disease to which she eventually succumbed. And he tells of one night when his little girl was very sick and he was sitting alone with her in the hospital room. She was in a great deal of pain and she asked him, “Dad, when will the leukemia go away?” It was a question that no parent wants to hear ... and it was a question that no parent knows the answer to. And he responded, “I don't know darling, but we are going to do everything in our power to find a way to cure it.” There was a long silence. And then his little girl asked, “Have you asked God when the leukemia will go away?” “Well, you know darling we've asked God to come take it away.” “I know, but have you asked him when he will take it away?”

She was waiting, you see. And John Claypool says that it was in that moment when he was waiting ... that this passage from Isaiah came to his mind. And he realized at that moment what the passage was all about. It was about waiting. But it wasn't about

waiting for a cure ... it wasn't about waiting for your ship to come in ... it wasn't about waiting for your plans to be realized ... it was plainly and simply about waiting for the strength to go on. And in the quiet darkness of that hospital room, Claypool says that the strength came. God came with just enough strength for the pastor to walk and not faint. Not to rise up with wings like eagles ... not to run and not be weary. But to walk and not faint. God didn't take the leukemia away, but He gave a young pastor the strength to go on.

You see if Advent is to tell us anything it tells us that our waiting is for God and God alone. Our hope is in God and in God alone. And if the strength is to be found it is in the waiting and in the hoping. No guaranteed outcomes in this world, just the strength to put one foot in front of the other.

Haddon Robinson the great 20th century preacher tells of how for the longest time he never understood the poetry of Isaiah 40. That when the prophet talks about waiting for the strength of God why wouldn't he finish his poem with a rising crescendo – that those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength – they shall walk and not faint, they run and not be weary, they shall mount up with wings like eagle's. The tone of the poem seems headed the wrong direction. Rise up with wings like eagle's, run and not be weary, walk and not faint. But then, Robinson reports, there came for him his own dark night of the soul where the waiting for him made him doubt whether he could even get out of bed. That the best he could do was just put one foot in front of the other. And then he realized the wisdom of the prophet – that, yeah, sometimes the time comes and we mount up with wings like eagles, and yeah

sometimes the time comes and we can run and not be weary – but then there are the many of us who have those moments of long, dark night of the soul waiting – and the most courageous and miraculous movement of God is that we are able to put one foot in front of the other. To walk and not faint.

And isn't that what Advent is all about? One day at a time wondering what is the time for? And that in the waiting .. in the time at hand ... find the quiet movement of God. For we who wait ... we who wait for the Lord ... it is we who shall renew our strength. And maybe we'll mount up with wings like eagles ... maybe we'll run and not be weary ... and maybe... just maybe, most courageously, most miraculously, we will walk and not faint.



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