

First Presbyterian Church
September 9, 2012
Rev. Katherine Kerr

“In the Meantime”
Psalm 40
Matthew 4:1-11

I have to admit something to you. Few, if any, passages of scripture challenge me as much as the opening line of Psalm 40, read and sung so beautifully for us a moment ago. “I waited patiently for the Lord,” it reads. Waiting patiently isn’t exactly my forte. Patience is a virtue, I know, but for me it’s also a struggle, a struggle I imagine a number of you share with me.

I recently saw a quote from Simone Weil. “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life,” the French philosopher and mystic wrote. I can’t disagree- waiting is a part of life, for sure, and cultivating patience while doing it is a spiritual practice. If it is the foundation of the spiritual life, which I do not contest, then I can say for sure that I need to put some work into my foundation.

So I don’t stop reading Psalm 40 after the first sentence. This psalm is actually a go-to passage for me in tough times because, even though it starts with a challenge, it goes on to acknowledge how tough it can actually be to wait, but what the rewards of that waiting are. It is a beautiful, compelling prayer for God’s deliverance from difficulty.

And I don’t need to tell you that there is difficulty in life.

I wonder if Psalm 40 was a go-to prayer for Jesus. Immersed as he was in Hebrew Scriptures, I can’t help but believe that when he was cast out into the wilderness as we just read, pushed into a time of uncertainty and waiting, surely the Psalms were his faithful companion.

As we read in Matthew, just after Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, he “was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the Devil.” Another challenging scripture passage, to be sure. Are we really to believe that the Spirit, the same one who just came down from heaven like a dove and called Jesus “My Son, the Beloved,” then whisked him away to the wilderness to be tested? By the Devil?

It is hard for us to fathom this, but it is important for us to engage it. Jesus was led by the Spirit to the wilderness to be tested. I think there is a part of us that wrestles with the idea of God meting out tests. Though we read about it in Genesis with Abraham and Isaac, and here in Matthew, still we struggle with this idea of a testing, tempting God. Each Sunday, we pray,

“lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” but still we wonder how much control God really has over the good and the bad that happen to us.

That struggle comes into focus for us not just in those good times or those bad times, but also in the meantime.

Out in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was in the meantime. He had just come from the powerful, spiritual high of his baptism, and was on his way to start his ministry, but in the meantime he had some things to deal with. He fasted and was famished. He was tested and prevailed. He was alone.

Though we may not face exactly the same challenges Jesus did there in the wilderness, there is no doubt that each of us, from time to time, finds ourselves in the meantime. It is that time in life when we found ourselves between two poles, waiting, hungering, wondering.

The meantime finds us in lots of ways. It comes to us

- between call and ministry

-between inception and completion

-between tragedy and triumph

-between hope and realization

-between diagnosis and cure

-between loss and recovery

The meantime takes on lots of shapes in our lives. It is that place where we find ourselves in between where we were and where we are going, and not quite sure how we are going to get there.

The meantime is a time of testing and temptation. It is a time marked by uncertainty and anxiety, a time in which we are called like at no other time to wait patiently for the Lord.

The meantime can be a mean time.

Knowing what to do, how to be, in the meantime, is a vital part of the life of discipleship. For our lives are not just made up of the peaks and the valleys- the great spiritual highs and the deep spiritual lows that are marks along the way. In fact, more of our lives happen in the meantime than in those powerful, notable extremes.

A number of years ago, I was with my nephew, Davis, who is now almost 12. He was a toddler at the time, full of energy and up for anything active. We were visiting my parents in Florida,

and he was mildly obsessed with the shiny red tricycle they kept for him at their house. So one afternoon, we decided to take it out for a spin around the block.

Thrilled to have wheels, he took off down the sidewalk like a shot, all energy and joy. We rounded the corner and off he went again, this time with just a slight decrease in enthusiasm. As we turned the next corner, I could tell his energy was starting to wane. After just a few pedals, he stopped abruptly, right in front of a neighbor's house, planted his little feet on the ground, and looked up at me and said, "I'm all done. This is our new house."

Poor little guy was stuck in the meantime. He'd started out on the high of a new adventure, thrilled about what was going to happen. But it took too long. He got tired and was willing to give everything up in order to be able to stop.

We sat there for a while, out on the sidewalk, as I explained to him that this was, in fact, not our new house, that someone else lived there and that our only choice was to keep going to get back to Ray Ray and Hambone's house. We could go back the way we came, I said, or we could keep going forward, but either way, we had to keep going.

And so we kept going, slowly at times, with a few little bursts of energy. I gave him lots of encouragement and the occasional push. I distracted him with silliness and before either of us knew it, we had made it around the block.

I have remembered that somewhat mundane trip with my nephew all these years not just because of my relationship with him, but also because of what that little trek around the block taught me about the meantime.

It is so easy for us to get caught in the slog of life between point a and point b (or point a and point a as the case may be). It is so easy to believe the hype that point a and point b are where life really happens, instead of understanding that life happens on every step along the way. It is so tempting to get frustrated by what we are asked to do in the meantime that we just want to stop where we are and give up.

When Jesus was thrown into the wilderness, just after one of the most significant moments of his life to that point, I have to think that, in his humanity, he was wondering what was going on. Fresh from the high of his baptism and the proclamation of his Sonship, he's thrown into isolation and 40 days of fasting. Kind of anti-climactic. Probably not what he'd hoped for.

And then, to top it all off, instead of being rewarded for his faithfulness after the fast, he finds himself face to face with the Devil, being tested- asked to perform miraculous feats to prove himself, and to gain power and glory.

Instead of faltering, though, Jesus remains strong. In his response to the tests of his meantime wilderness days, Jesus shows us how we might begin to practice the spiritual discipline of "waiting patiently in expectation" when we come to our own wilderness periods.

So what does he do? Well, first he fasts. In the spiritual life, fasting is a representation of utter devotion to God and a rejection of the temptation for human measures of security and success.¹ When put in an uncomfortable, unfamiliar situation, Jesus didn't turn first to his own devices to try to fix the problem; rather, he turned to his heavenly father in an act of utter abandonment to God's will. His fasting was a sign that, even if he didn't know what was going on or how it would turn out, he trusted in God to bring him through this and all challenges.

And after the fast, as the devil tempts him to prove who he is and offers him power over all of the kingdoms, Jesus remains strong by turning to God's word, rebuking the Devil with the power of scripture.

While we are not likely to be tempted to put God to the test by leaping from a cliff, we do face the great temptation of not trusting God to lead us and be with us in the tough times. While none of us is likely to be cast by the Spirit into the literal wilderness, and we will probably not come face to face with the devil in the way Jesus did, his response to those things shows us something that is important to us in our meantimes.

Turning our trust to God and not ourselves, immersing ourselves in God's word through study, worship and prayer are the keys to living faithfully in the meantime.

Our struggles and temptations don't have to be the same as those Jesus faced in order for us to learn from and be changed by how he faced them.

If you are a fan of the Weather Channel as I am, you may have heard a term during recent hurricane coverage. The "cone of uncertainty" is what meteorologists sometimes call the predicted path of a tropical storm or hurricane. It starts at a fixed point- where the storm is at the moment- and branches out like a cone in the direction it seems to be headed. The storm could veer east or west in that path, but most agree that it will head in that general direction.

Aren't we all, in one way or another, in a cone of uncertainty?

We know where we've been- there are fixed points on all of our maps. Births and deaths, graduations and new school years, relationships beginning and ending, jobs offered and jobs lost, dreams conceived and dreams realized- all along this path called life, there are significant events that shape and inform who we are and where we are going.

But in between those points, it is a cone of uncertainty. We don't know today what tomorrow will bring. We can hope and pray for certain things to happen or for others not to happen, but we know that we are not in charge of that. We stand at a fixed point now, and look toward where

¹ Paraphrased from *The Discipleship Study Bible* notes, Matthew 4:2

we want to be, knowing that any number of factors can influence how, when, and if we will get there.

As people of this world who like to be in control, this can be daunting, to say the least. But as people of faith, who trust that God is in control, we do not despair, because our hope is in something far greater than anything we can comprehend.

We at First Presbyterian Church have been in our own meantime for the past two years or so. From Bill Wood's final Sunday in this pulpit on November 21, 2010, to Pen Peery's first Sunday in this pulpit on September 16, 2012, we have faced our own "cone of uncertainty." As always happens in such times, there have been lots of questions. What would happen to us? How would we be in the interim? What would we lose? What might we gain? Who would be the next to lead this church in her ministry in this place?

Some of those questions have been answered now, but others remain. The fact of the matter is that the work of this church did not end on November 2010 and it will not start back up next Sunday. The church has- you have-been being church in the meantime. There has been joy and there has been sorrow. There have been losses, and there have been gains. There have been lots of regular days when not much happened at all, and there have been some irregular days when unexpected things happened. We have lived in faith, trusting in our God to guide us through what we ourselves can not control.

We have walked through challenge and uncertainty, and no doubt we will face more in the future.

We are about to place a new dot on our map, and that is a reason for great joy. But it does not mean that we grow complacent, or that we think that we've finally gotten it all figured out.

We've made it through one meantime. But it is not our last. And the joyful truth of the gospel is that, as much as we celebrate the pivotal moments in our lives, we need not fear the meantime. For as Jesus experienced in the wilderness, and we experience in our own lives, God is with us not just in the peaks and valleys, but in every moment in between as well.

Thanks be to God.