

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost
July 26, 2020
St. Paul's, Wilmington
A Sermon by the Rev'd Raymond J Hanna

They say that “good things come those who wait.” What they don’t say, is how long do you have to wait for those good things to happen? A day? A week? A month? A year? decades? The writer William Faulkner said: “And sure enough, even waiting, will end if you can just wait long enough.” How many of us can wait long enough? Waiting, even under innocuous circumstances, is hard to do. I am ready to invent new words of profanity if I have to wait more than 3 seconds for my computer to boot up. I don’t like to wait for anything. Waiting is even harder to do in circumstances of great import. It is hard to wait for a soldier’s safe return. It is hard to wait for a child’s fever to pass. It is hard to wait for the results of a biopsy. It is hard to wait for the new season of Ozark to come out on Netflix. It’s hard to wait for a return to the comforting pattern of coming to church every Sunday, listening to inspiring music, being fed by the bread of life and cup of salvation, sharing laughter and fellowship, food, and hugs. It’s hard to wait for a vaccine for COVID-19. It’s hard to wait for the wrongs of injustice and racism to heal.

We are tired of waiting. We want what we want, and we want it now. “Just wait,” is not a response that satisfies us. Yet if you thumb through the pages of scripture the people of God are called to wait. The Psalmist admonishes us to wait patiently for the Lord and God will give us our heart’s desire. Wait for God’s word to speak to you. Wait for the appointed time. Wait through the sadness of the night for the joy that comes in the morning. Wait for the Kingdom of God to come near. Wait with patience. Wait with strength. Wait with courage. Wait with hope. Wait with faith.

Today’s lesson from Genesis is a funny story about waiting. It seems to me that there is a lot more humor in the Hebrew Bible than there is in the New Testament. That is why I am frequently drawn to it for sermon material. Today we hear the next episode of the saga of Abraham and his family. Last week in his sermon, Adam talked about the trickster Jacob who steals his brother Esau’s birthright. It is a brilliant example of just how unfair life can be. Today, for just a moment, we see that life isn’t always fair to Jacob.

Jacob has gone to work for his uncle Laban, his mother Rebekah’s brother. And as they negotiate the contract, Laban says to Jacob, “I want you to work for me, but I don’t want to take advantage of you because you are my nephew, so tell me what you want your wages to be.” That’s quite a nice perk—nepotism at it’s finest. Jacob says

to his uncle, “I want you to give me your daughter Rachel to marry as my compensation.” You have to ignore how sexist and wrong that is, and chalk it up to the culture of the time in which such an arrangement was not uncommon. Laban agrees to Jacob’s proposal to work for him for 7 years after which he can take Rachel as his bride. But it turns out that Laban is just as much a trickster as his nephew Jacob.

Laban has two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Leah, we are told, has lovely eyes. Now when you told someone has lovely eyes, it is probably code for she has a great personality. Rachael on the other hand, is drop dead gorgeous. Although looks shouldn’t matter, they do. Time passes, and the seven years go by quickly because Jacob is so in love with Rachel. He knows that good things come to those who wait.

The seven years are up, Laban makes good on his promise and he hosts a wedding banquet. Now the story takes a surprising turn. Remember when a bride gets married her head is covered. Laban tricks Jacob and it is Leah, not Rachel, who winds up in the honeymoon sweet. I won’t speculate too much, but I imagine it was quite a shock for Jacob when he woke up the next morning to find Leah with the beautiful eyes lying next to him in bed. When Jacob confronts Laban about his despicable deception, Laban responds by saying, “well it is tradition that the eldest daughter cannot be the first to get married.” He then makes Jacob promise to work for him for another 7 years in order to have Rachel be his wife. Talk about life not being fair. But Jacob waited, and the promise was finally fulfilled.

In today’s epistle lesson from Romans, the apostle Paul puts a little bit of a twist on the saying :”good things come to those who wait.” He says: “all things work together for good for those who love God.” Those words remind me of my grandmother’s assurance that when trouble comes, somehow in the end, it’s all going to work out.

Good things happen for those who love God. Astonishing things happen in fact. Jesus tells us —the smallest seeds produce the greatest shrubs. Hidden treasure is found in a field or at a flea market, or on a fishing expedition. Enemies are reconciled. Justice wins. But these good things don’t happen on our time schedule.

The challenge for us is to wait for them with faith, with prayer and with patience— recognizing that we are going to go through some tough and painful times. Prayers seem to go unanswered, or answered in ways we do not welcome. Doubt and fear peck away at us. Frustration, anger, fear and distrust boils over in these moments. All things work together for good, not as I define them, or you define them, but as God wills them. We may wait for 7 years and not wind up with the beautiful Rachel, or the

lovely eyed Leah. Remember the Israelites waited 40 years to get to the Promised Land and when they got there, Moses died before they could enter. No matter how long we have to wait, as we wait, we are fed by the sacraments, supported by the prayers of others and buoyed by their sacrifice. We are given strength to withstand hardship, and to grow in faith and love toward God and our neighbor.

As we wait, God surprises us with a love that is abundant and indestructible. Nothing can overcome love's power. Neither death, nor life, nor Angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation (including addiction, political upheaval COVID-19). Nothing will separate us from the love of God. Just wait and see.