

## **Waiting Expectant, Watching For Signs**

Sermon on Psalm 27

Sunday February 28, 2010

Trinity United, Ottawa

Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

This Psalm is about living in faithful expectation that God will show up for us - in this life. About trusting that the Lord's face will appear to us, and if we wait expectantly, maybe we'll even notice.

This faithful attitude of 'waiting in expectation' evokes an image of our dog. On a weekday evening, my husband's arrival time for supper is not predictable by the clock. But when I'm making something time-sensitive for dinner, I've learned that our dog Jessi's behaviour will tell me when to put the pasta into the pot. When Bob's about five minutes from home, the dog reliably goes to the front door and stares at it intently, making a particular whining sound in anticipation of the joyous daily reunion. She has such a keen sense of her Master's presence, that she is there waiting to greet him, long before he arrives. Neither of them wants to miss that tail-wagging moment at the door! Neither of them is ever disappointed.

Bob and I wonder *how* Jessi knows when he's coming. With her super-keen canine sense of smell, perhaps she can detect him from a mile away? Does she hear our car from such a distance? Or is she somehow tuned into his energy field or his thoughts, like radio waves? Mere dim-witted mere human that I am, I cannot discern when my husband is coming. But I have learned to see Jessi's behaviours as the sign of the immanence of our beloved's presence. Whatever it is, she has a well-honed 'Bob sense.'

Sometimes I think of faith as a well-honed 'God sense.' A trusting expectation of God's appearances in our lives, that is perhaps equal parts instinct and training? Faith is an attitude and an intention that tunes our senses to see the Holy coming to us. Even in the dark. Even when we think we are lost, alone in our wilderness.

“God will conceal me under the cover of his tent. He will set me on a high rock.” says the Psalmist. “Come, my heart says, seek his face.” When we practise our faith, we seek God’s face - in all God’s infinite appearances. Through religion, we train our sense of the Holy. Through religion, we awaken and hone our innate human spiritual intuition, so that we will not miss our daily reunions. Even when we feel lost in our darkness, we pray and wait expectantly, squinting into the distance, till at last we discern the outline of God’s next Inukshuk up ahead, guiding us safely along life’s path.

Practising faith, we feel the assurance of the God we expect, even before God’s rescue arrives. Those who learn to wait in the experienced knowing that ‘We will see the goodness of the Lord’, find that the waiting contains the ‘already.’ Fear is cast out and hope created. Happiness, says the Psalmist, belongs to those who are constantly open to God’s leadings.

God’s timing is one of the great challenges to our faith, though, isn’t it? Are you - or somebody you love - going through a dark time, a wilderness episode on your life journey? “Wait for the Lord!”, our Psalmist repeats for emphasis. Waiting expectant is not so easy when we feel lost. Yet we will only see God’s signs in God’s time, and maybe we’ll only recognize it if we are attentive.

God does not appear to us according to our impatience. So we need to practise giving in to God’s timing - ‘Kairos time’ - keep our eyes on the NOW, to see God’s signs. Then we’ll notice that sudden appearance of the sunshine amidst our clouds of struggle. “Great souls grow through struggles and storms and seasons of suffering” reminds one Biblical commentator. “If it seems slow,” says the Book of Habakkuk (2:3) “Do not despair for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day!”

The Psalmist asks God to ‘teach me your way’, because faith is part gift and part

learned. It is a practised, patient ability to pick up on God's signs in our world. To notice the beauty, love, guidance and compassion that is everywhere.

Faith is a human 'gift' from our Creator, for tuning our awareness to the Master's Mystical Presence. But like a musical gift or any ability, our spirituality has to be awakened, by grace or religious education. According to neurological research, we all have a structure in our brains that 'lights up' with spiritual experiences like meditation and music. But, did you know, the parts of our brain that are most used by early adolescence grow, while those that are not exercised quickly begin to die off? We are all born with a myriad of mental capacities - for instance, the ability to make the sounds of every human language. But the sounds that are never spoken become tongue twisters after a certain age. So, as with language, we need spiritual timely spiritual opportunities and education to develop our spiritual sense.

I've learned to appreciate the worship practices of my Catholic childhood, for perhaps awakening of 'spiritual instincts.' I sure didn't like it as a child, any more than a kid likes practising piano scales, but sitting in church with nothing to do but contemplate the stained glass pictures of Jesus and watch the flickering candles while the Latin liturgy flowed over me, awakened in me an expectation for God. It taught me how to take time to 'be still and know God.' So when, much later in life, after my adolescent detour into atheism, I started having 'God-incidences' there was - thankfully - an explanation for these mystical moments, other than madness.

Spiritual practise sensitizes us to God's immanent presence. Shows us how to recognize the signs of sacred guidance. Not just in church and by candle light, but anywhere in life. And the more we practise, the more we learn to trust that we will eventually see the Light in our darkness.

This season of Lent is traditionally a time to recognize our wilderness challenges and spiritual wanderings in the dark - on the way to Easter Joy. Ironically, my

personal Lenten wilderness challenge confronted me right on schedule - on Ash Wednesday. A conversation about the future of worship at Trinity erupted my fear of conflict in our community. In the past, deficit budget projections, the consequent JNAC process and staff changes were personally and collectively painful. You don't need reminding. So this discussion 'triggered' old fear and insecurity in me. I stepped right into my own wilderness.

But you know, one of the great blessings of this role is that I don't get to grovel very long. To preach with integrity on Sunday, every Sunday, I *have* to practise my faith. So I named my Lenten stone 'fear' and started keeping it in my pocket, to remind me to praying daily. To trust that God will show up among us again - maybe even at Council - and guide us on the right way - where there are no sides but God's side.

I'm also walking our Labyrinth regularly, because it points me - body, mind and Spirit- toward what is Holy. I enter its winding arms in 'waiting expectation' of what God wants to show me. And guess what? God has already started showing up.

When I 'suit up and show up' for God at the Labyrinth, God shows up for me. At least, when I'm in the Labyrinth, I notice. I discover meaning. I am open to God guiding my steps. I enter, seeking God's face, and as the curving path commands my time and attention, I let go of my hurray and give in to every surprise Spiritual encounter.

A Labyrinth insight reminded me that Trinity will not necessarily choose the straightforward path to the Holy Centre that I think I see, but a winding path will just as surely get us there. When Worship Committee walked the Labyrinth together last Sunday, I kept noticing how my journey regularly circled me back from 'walking alone', to walking in community. I kept meeting up with people I love who are sharing this journey. My Spirit was calmed and assured by some side- by-side encounters. I was challenged to see from a different perspective, when I faced 'others' on their Way.

I am hoping that by Good Friday, God will help me lay down my 'fear stone' by the Cross. I want to dance with you all to Easter resurrection. There is, as always, this question of God's timing, but my spiritual intuition says even now, God is there! God does not hide. She is just around the next embracing curve of life's Labyrinth. God is already here. So shall we walk forward into Lent all together? Wait for the Lord - expectant!

Even if we can't wag our tails - we can sing our delight in seeking and seeing God's face - everywhere. In The Quiet Curve of Evening, you are there!

Voices United #278