

Homily – More Than Waiting

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One of the keepsakes that I have from my grandmother is a two volume set of books called “The Great Rebellion.” These two books are about the American Civil War and the first was written in 1862 and the second was written in 1864. The Civil War was from 1861 to 1865, so these two books were written in the middle of the war. The two books are a very detailed account of the war, its causes, at least the causes that were understood while in the midst of the first year of the war. It is often said that the victor writes history, but these two books show history while it is happening. Written in the north, these two books show confidence that the Union will defeat the Confederacy, but the outcome is still uncertain. Written 160 years ago, I am fascinated by these books that show life during and in the midst of great events. I wonder what they will be saying about 2020 one-hundred and sixty years in the future in the year 2180. It feels like we are living in the midst of something. Do you feel that way too?

Two thousand years ago, they were also living in the midst of something. As we heard in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus was walking the earth and had not yet been crucified and resurrected. Now, for the last many months we have been reading each Sunday morning from the Gospel according to Matthew, but today with the start of a new church year, and the start of Advent, we have switched into the Gospel according to Mark. Scholars believe that Mark is the earliest of the gospels. It was the first one written, and it was probably written around 70 AD or forty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. It was written at a time in which there was hindsight to what had happened with Jesus. But, it is also written at a time in which the early followers of Jesus are waiting for the return of Jesus. Today’s reading shows this tension of living in the midst while waiting, and waiting, and waiting. My shortened rewrite of today’s reading is “Wait, wait, wait. Watch, watch, watch. Keep going. Do it again. Take care of yourselves. Help others do the same. You’re not the first, nor the last to wonder where Jesus is in all of this. Wait, wait, wait. Watch, watch, watch. Keep going.” Two thousand years ago, they were waiting and watching to see what God was going to do next. Do you feel like that is what we are doing today?

We often talk about the sacrifices that we are making during this time of the Coronavirus. But, I think there is a significant blessings as well. In this frenetic world that was getting faster and faster, we have been forced to slow down and live in the present. Everything is about the present, and we are letting go of planning for the future. We don’t know when we will be released. We have the relentlessness of the present moment. Now, now, now. And, I think there is spiritual benefit to living in the now. Let me explain.

Psychologists tell us that a person who lives only for the present is considered to be immature. The person who lives only for the present is like a child who spends all his weekly allowance the day he receives it, with the result that he has no money for the next six days. This type of immaturity is also called "an inability to delay gratification". Impulses and appetites control people who can't delay gratification. These people are exceedingly immature, chronically in difficulty with banks, mortgage companies and employers, and not infrequently in trouble with the law. Whatever they crave they have to have now, whether what they crave is punching someone they don't like or pursuing an illicit relationship with someone they do like. Living "in the present" in this sense of the word -- instant gratification -- isn't good.

And, what about living in the past? It is good to have a past and to cherish the past. It's good to cherish tradition. After all, our generation is not the first generation. There is wisdom to be gleaned from the past, and we would be fools to ignore such wisdom. More to the point, a person without a past is like a person with no memory. Just as the person with no memory has no identity, so the person with no past has no identity -- and therefore doesn't know who she is. Without a past we can't know who we are! Obviously it's crucial to have a past and to cherish our past.

Yet while we must have a past we must not live in the past. We must not overly romanticize the past. For you see, in romanticizing the past we falsify the past. Romantically we create a "past" that never was. As Christians we sometimes romanticize the 1950s as the high point of our church. We wish things could be like that again. We also romanticize the time of Christ and the early church. We wish that we could live like they did two thousand years ago and have the type of deep faith that seems to be exhibited in the New Testament. We want the "good old days", but, does anyone want to live in the days before many of the medical miracles that we have today? Does anyone want to live in a time when women and slaves were treated as property? We should have a past and should cherish our past. At the same time, only the silliest romantic wants to live in the past.

Then what about the future? Once again we should anticipate a future and cherish and plan for the future. Not to anticipate a future is to live for instant gratification in the present -- and we have already noted the perils of that immaturity. At the same time, even as we anticipate our future and cherish it we must not live for the future. People who live for the future are investing everything in the future, with the result that the present is worthless. People who live for the future discount the present and feel that they can only be happy in the future when certain things change or get fixed. Some feel they can only be happy when they finally get married. Some feel they can only be happy when they retire in ten years. Some feel they can only be happy when exams are done, or the work project is complete, or the sermon is written. People

who assume that waves of happiness are going to flood them in ten years are joyless today. To live in the past is to bury oneself in a past that never was -- and thereby render the present insignificant. To live for the future is to fantasize about a future that is never going to be -- and once again render the present insignificant. The path to happiness and joy is to cherish both past and future, yet live in the present.

If we live in the present, then we can expect two things to happen. First, we can expect the calming of many of our fears and anxieties. And second, we can expect to be more aware of the presence of God in our lives. Don't these sound like things you want in your life and in the lives of your loved ones?

We are a society and people that is plagued by anxiety and fear. Like the disciples two thousand years ago, we live our lives shaped and controlled by our fears and anxieties about money and health and status and power. Imagine what it would be like give up these fears and anxieties and to live in a state of joy. The things you spend so much time on—all this work you do might not seem as important. We get too concerned about who is the greatest and not concerned enough about spending time with the children that surround us. The loving relationships we have, the universe around us, we take these things for granted. Why can't we see the blessings that surround us? Do we really need to face death before we will pay attention to each moment? Why do we let anxiety fuel our engines, driving us to think always of the "shoulds" and the "what ifs?" Why does it always seem as though we are running on a treadmill?

Are we that afraid to stand still? When we become lost in the memories of the past or pre-occupation about the future, we forget the power of paying attention and how, without attention, we live on the surface, and our lives lack joy. In any discussion about why we avoid living in the present or seeing what is really before us, it is important to face the fact that sometimes, what is before us seems unbearable. Sometimes we are in so much pain that even when we do look around us, we can't see anything but the pain. Sometimes great things—even unexpected miracles, can be standing right in front of us but we can't see them.

And that is the second benefit of living in the present. When we live in the here and now, we start to notice the eternal presence of God. Through the enormity of time and space, God is always with us. God is with us in the good times and the bad times. God is with us in the big things and God is with us in the small things.

Living in the present means seeing without the lens of panic or fear so that we can pay attention to the miracles that are right in front of us. It is about accepting what is. It is knowing that Jesus has assured us of a future. It is about remembering but not continuously reliving the high school days. It is about letting go of all the fretting

when we are trying to decide to sell the house or not. It is about learning how to die so that we can learn how to live. When we are present, we are more alive and are held in the eternal embrace of God.

At some point in the future these days we are living through in 2020 will be studied and dissected. Some will see great deeds, and others will see the wrongs that have been done. We do this ourselves as we sift through the past for clues about how to lead better lives. What have we learned from two thousand years ago when the early followers of Jesus were waiting for his to return? Have we learned anything from 160 years ago during the time of the Civil War? Are we learning anything from today as we shelter at home? I think what we must learn from all of these is that God is always present with us. We are already very blessed by God. Do you see the blessings?