

Waiting Room

Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Luke 1:39-55

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Editor's note: This sermon was preached during Advent 1994 following a family tragedy.

Last Sunday we gathered in this sanctuary to read the lessons which encouraged us to rejoice. The preacher, Stephen Caine, told us we could rejoice even when the circumstances, the external evidence around us, were not conducive to rejoicing. The sermon and the lessons told us it is an act of faith to rejoice in the face of adversity and I agreed. Soon after that worship service, I was called upon along with others in my family to live out that affirmation of faith. I am still struggling with that affirmation in my own life.

Another irony of the last week has to do with the sermon title today. In planning for services during Advent and Christmas, the bulletin for today was prepared a couple of weeks ago. Searching for a title for today's sermon, I read a piece by my good friend Dudley Crawford who is pastor in West End, North Carolina. He wrote about waiting rooms and how what goes on in waiting rooms is symbolic of what we do during Advent. That struck me as a very appropriate theme and one that fits for today. So I chose the sermon title for today two weeks ago. Little did I know that I would spend a lot of time during the week before this sermon in a waiting room. Waiting to hear a report from a CAT scan about the injuries to our son. Waiting to make contact with the father of his friend, Wendy Dwyer, to tell him that his daughter had been killed. Waiting for the doctors to come and tell us that the surgery was over, and to find out what they could do to repair the brokenness in our son's body.

I was sitting in the waiting room outside the surgical intensive care unit in the Pitt County Memorial Hospital in Greenville on Monday. As often happens when you sit in a waiting room you rub shoulders with other people who are there with other patients. Two men sitting with me were carrying on a conversation about another patient in surgical intensive care. I didn't get all of what they were saying but I got enough to realize that this person must have been their minister. He was very sick and they were trying to figure out why. One of them suggested that it must be like Job. God must be testing him. The other man objected and said, "No, no, this is not like Job. This is the work of Satan. You have to realize that Satan is at work in this world."

Both men had biblical evidence on their sides and I was eavesdropping. I must tell you that it seemed to me at first to be an absurd conversation. But I was also waiting to find out how Banks was doing. My interest in their conversation I realized was more than professional. How do we understand the role of God in our lives, particularly when things go wrong? It is easy to understand how God is at work when things are going well but how can you understand God in our lives when things go wrong? When the bottom falls out, where is God?

That is a question debated in the waiting rooms, all the waiting rooms, of our lives as we await the results of a test or we wait to see the doctor or we wait to hear from God.

How do we know about God? Is it mere speculation? Your opinion is as good as

mine. Your guess is as good as mine. We ask about God when there is a seemingly senseless automobile accident or an airplane goes down killing fifteen people. Now most of our lives we live on a predictable track. We know what is coming next. We get ready for it. But then on those occasions when the wheels come off. Why? That is the question debated in the waiting rooms of our lives.

As people of faith we do not just speculate. We take the Bible and we say, "You want to know who God is? What God is like? Well let me tell you some stories." We tell stories. "In those days there was a woman who was visited by an angel named Gabriel." "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed." "The women went to the tomb to take care of the body of Jesus and found the stone rolled away." At the heart of our faith is a story. In a world with all kinds of assumptions about how the divine works, about how things happen, we say, "Here is a story." It just so happens that the story for today has been helpful to me during the past week. It helped as I have wrestled with what we can expect from God.

The pieces we read from Micah and Psalm 80 that we sang together came after 587 B.C. Now what you have to understand is for the people of Israel 587 was like 1941 in our history, the year of Pearl Harbor. It was a year that changed everybody's life. It was the year that the temple of Jerusalem fell. The people felt their whole world was coming apart. Jerusalem was the holy city and it was falling. People were being taken away from their homes, uprooted and taken into exile. These were religious people. Where was God?

Then the message came. "You have not been forgotten. Your suffering has not gone unnoticed by God. In a little town called Bethlehem, a child will be born and that child will be your Savior." It was a gorgeous pipe dream. Nothing more. Unless, of course, you know the rest of the story.

God visited a young Jewish woman named Miriam. That was her Jewish name. We call her Mary. She was about fifteen years old when the Angel Gabriel made this startling announcement to her that not only was she pregnant but she was going to bear God's child. "Greetings," the angel said to her. "The Lord is with you." What sort of greeting was this? What must have been going through her young mind? What am I going to say to my parents? How will I explain it to my boyfriend? "Do not be afraid," the angel said to her. Did you notice how often the first thing God's messenger says to us is "Do not be afraid." William Faulkner once wrote, "The basis of all things is to be afraid." Fear comes naturally to us as we wait for some word from the Lord.

Then Miriam asked that very human question, "How can this be? How can this be?" How many times have you and I asked the question? It is the question of credibility. Is the presence and power of God a creditable force given the reality that we experience? Miriam believed. She responded in faith. She believed that God was going to straighten things out. She said, "The mighty hand of God is stretched out and will set things right." She believed that God was the one who does not ignore our suffering but comes as an infant to share the burdens of this life.

Remember the baby's name was Jesus. But they also called the baby Emmanuel which means "God with us." When we got that call every parent dreads—your child has been in an automobile accident, his friend has been killed and he is being airlifted to Pitt County Memorial Hospital, I was afraid. How can this be? Is God with us? This week, Miriam taught me about living in the waiting room.

Now about those two guys who were arguing about whether it was like Job for their

friend or whether it was Satan at work in his life. They were still arguing. And one of them suggested that they might get up and go to the snack bar and get something to eat. Well, I didn't want to miss the end of their conversation so I decided that I would stretch my legs too. I got up and I walked just enough ahead of them, you know, not be conspicuous. But all the time I was listening to what they were saying. One of them said, "You know, I don't think we are going to be able to decide this one." The other one said, "Yea, you are probably right." But he went on to say, "You know I think one thing we can agree on." "What's that?" "God has been present with us this week. We have felt God's presence through the love and support of those around us." And I said, "Amen. Amen."

This week I remembered a story that Don Wardlaw told me about his father's funeral. Don taught preaching at Columbia Seminary when I was in Atlanta. He and his family were members of the congregation that I served there. He now teaches at McCormick Seminary in Chicago. Don's father was also a Presbyterian minister. The last church his father served was in Louisiana, and when his father died, the family went back to this church for the funeral. Don said that it was really a good experience. He saw a lot of people who remembered his dad and told him stories about him. He said the person who stuck out most in his mind on that occasion was the sexton. He had moved to another town but he drove back to be there for the funeral. He came up to Don and said, "You know, your dad was very, very special and important to me." Don replied, "Oh, I know, Leon; you were very important to him." He said, "No, I don't think you understand. I don't think I would be here today if it were not for your dad. I would not have made it through that horrible night." "What do you mean?" He said, "During the time that your dad was pastor of this church and he and I worked together here, you probably don't remember this because you were a little boy, but my wife died suddenly. She was only thirty-four years old. She was hanging out clothes on the line. She had a massive heart attack. She didn't even make it to the hospital alive. We had four small kids. I will never forget that day. I was just devastated. I was so emotionally drained that I fell across the bed. I remember lying in the bed and it had gotten dark. I looked up at one point and I could see your dad had come into the room and was sitting in a rocking chair beside my bed rocking. He just sat there rocking. All night long I would wake up and I would reach over to where my wife usually was and I would feel that emptiness. The pain would shoot through me like a thousand arrows. And I wondered how in the world can I go on. And then, out of the corner of my eye I would see him rocking, rocking. It was the rocking that helped me make it through the night."

Friends, this week I saw the rocking. Not clearly. But just out of the corner of my eye. In a little town called Bethlehem, God rocked. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." And the mighty hand of God reached out and rocked the grave and God raised Jesus from the dead. God rocked. These are the stories that have helped me make it through this week. I offer them to you with the hope that they will be helpful to you as we rejoice. Rejoice, Emmanuel has come to you and me. Amen.