

As You Look Forward to the Day of God

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

August 6, 2023 PM Sermon

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2 Peter 3:1-13

Right from the get-go, Peter makes it clear that he wants to teach you some theology. He wants to work on your doctrine. He wants to sharpen your understanding of God. "I have written this letter to stimulate you to wholesome thinking." says Peter. And so, in keeping with Peter's aim, tonight you will get something of a theological sermon.

We can even be specific about the area of theology that Peter wants to address. He's interested in fine-tuning our doctrine of providence. Providence is the understanding of how God relates to the world, how God is active in the world. Is he close or is he distant? Is he hands on or is he hands off? Is he present or is he absent? These are the questions of providence.

Peter does not raise this theological issue out of the blue. He doesn't pick his topic at random. The nature of God's providence is an issue that has been on the hearts and minds of the people in the church. You see, the people of the early church are beginning to doubt God's providence. They are beginning to wonder if God does much of anything in the world. They're beginning to wonder if maybe God has forgotten them. And they are feeling this way because the second coming hadn't happened yet.

When they first became Christians, they thought providence would be explosive. They knew Jesus had gone into heaven but they also knew he promised to come back. And they thought he would come back soon. They thought he would quickly come back just as he promised to put an end to all their troubles. But things didn't quite happen that way. The church waited 10 years, and no Jesus. They waited 20 years, and no Jesus. They waited 30 years, and no Jesus. Now many of the first generation of Christians were dying off and persecution was ratcheting up and still no Jesus. And people were starting to get restless, they were starting to question, they were starting to doubt. Scoffers were standing up and saying, "Where is this coming he promised!!! He's not coming! God's not going to do anything!! Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation!" Wake up people! There is no hand on the wheel of history! There is no providence! Stuff just happens!

If 30 years was long enough to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of the church, what must 2000 years do? 2000 years of people singing "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" 2000 years of great expectations. 2000 years of Maranatha, come quickly Lord Jesus! 2000 years and still waiting. 2000 years can raise a lot of doubts and questions about providence.

In the movie Proof of Life, Meg Ryan's character plays a woman who has had a hard life. Her marriage is difficult, and she has no children even though she desperately wants them. She used to have a child. After years of trying to conceive she finally got pregnant and to her great joy, she had a baby! But her happiness was short lived. The baby dies leaving Ryan alone to chew on her grief. In the movie there is an exchange between her and another character where she talks about the death of her child and she says, "You know I used to think things happened for a reason, like they had a purpose or something. But now I don't think things happen for a reason, now I think they just happen."

"Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." It's the same worldview. It's the same sentiment. The delay in Christ's return, the daily disappointments of life, these cause people to give up on providence. God is an absentee parent. He's a deadbeat dad. He may have fathered us but he's not paying attention to us. There is no driver at the wheel of history. We are alone.

2 Peter 3:1-13 is an answer to the scoffers and an answer to our doubts. Peter is trying to help us see that we can still be confident in God's good providence for us. For those of us struggling to figure out why God is taking so long coming back, Peter offers at least 2 things to think about. Peter offers us a word of comfort and word of instruction. He both soothes us and he calls us to action.

First he gives us the word of comfort. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." What

looks like God's inaction, says Peter, is really God's patience. God is making room for people to change or repent. He's giving them time and space to come around. It's not inaction, its patience.

From a parent's perspective, patience is one of the most important virtues in raising a child. From a parent's perspective patience is one of the most important expressions of their love for their children. But from a child's perspective, patience often looks like inaction. Imagine you're a Mom, and it's bedtime for your 4-year-old and your 5-year-old children. You can't wait to get them all in bed because they've kept you running all day. You can't wait till their asleep and you might have a quiet moment to read a book. But before the kids go to bed, you've told them to clean up the playroom. They've trashed it and everything needs to be put away. And they start strong, but after a couple of minutes they're running out of steam. They start to whine: "Mom help us! We can't do it! We're tired! There's too much!!" They are used to you doing everything for them. When they were younger that's how things went, so they are waiting for you to step in and help. They kind of liked it when they were younger and the parents were the ones who cleaned up the mess. And frankly there is part of you that would love to step in and just do it for them. There is a big part of you which just wants to get things clean and get the kids in bed and get to your book. You could clean this place in 2 minutes. They're going to take 20! But you don't step in. You don't help. Instead you patiently wait 20 minutes until the job is done.

Why? Because you love your kids. As a caring parent, you know that they need to mature and learn responsibility. You know that it isn't healthy for a parent to do everything for their child, and so you give them the job and you step back, and you encourage, and you prod, and you wait. You give them space to learn. This is not absentee parenting. In absentee parenting the parent isn't involved and doesn't care. This is patience. In patience the parent cares deeply and she is actively restraining herself for the sake of the child.

Fred Craddock tells the story, a true story, of a preacher he met who had no arms. He and his wife were visiting his church, and after the service the preacher introduced himself and told his story. He credited his mother as the greatest spiritual force in his life. She was a deeply caring and involved woman. When he was young, because of his disability, his mother did everything for him. She fed him. She wiped his nose and his bottom. She opened doors for him and turned on lights, she dressed him every morning and undressed him every night. One morning when he was about 7, she did something different. She took his clothes and threw them in a heap on the bedroom floor and said, "Here you go, put them on yourself." "I can't" he said. "Yes you can!" she said and she left him alone in his room with his clothes.

At first he was confused and hurt by his mother's absence. He called for her and begged her to come. Then he was angry. He screamed and yelled. "Why are you doing this to me!! I hate you! I hate you!!" Then he just sat on the floor and wept. Eventually he got around to trying to put on the clothes. He struggled and grunted and groaned and did a lot more crying, but eventually he got the clothes on. After he got his clothes on he went out to find the mother who had treated him so badly. He found her in the living room, and she was sobbing.

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God is patient with us. He is not inactive, he is exercising loving, active restraint. And that patience is costly. It has cost him both tears and blood.

The second word that Peter has to help us understand God's providence is a word of instruction. In the face of the scoffers, Peter talks about the end of the world and reiterates the promise that Christ will return and renew creation. Peter reiterates the promise that Christ will come again. The second coming will happen. Then he adds this amazing statement: since Christ is coming back, "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

Peter calls us to active waiting. Waiting for God isn't like waiting for a bus or waiting for a parade to start. That's passive waiting. Waiting for God is more vigorous than that. As we wait for God we live holy and godly lives. We don't just wait; we actually prepare the way. But Peter says even more than this, Peter says we speed his coming. We can speed the second coming of the Lord. We can speed up God's providence. That's an amazing claim: our holy and godly lives speed up God's providence.

If it was only this passage which suggests such a thing, we might be tempted to ignore such a statement, but it isn't just our passage. Psalm 85 finishes with a similar suggestion: "Righteousness goes before him and

prepares the way for his steps.” Isaiah 40, one of the other lectionary texts for the week says it too: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” says the prophet, “make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God!”

When we Christians talk about waiting as part of our faith, which we do especially in seasons like advent, we talk as though the waiting is our waiting for God. We think that we’re the ones who do the waiting. We look at things like poverty, thousands of children dying per day and we say, ‘how long O Lord! We’re waiting.’ We look at all the lost souls in the world, people whose lives are a mess without God and we say, “How long O Lord! We’re waiting.” We see that wars seem to never end and terrorism continues and we say ‘How Long O Lord! We’re waiting.’ But maybe we’re not the only ones waiting. Maybe God is the one waiting for us. Maybe he’s saying ‘I give you abundant resources, how long till you feed the children?’ Maybe he’s saying “I have given you my gospel and told you to share the good news, how long till you actually say something to your neighbor?” Maybe he’s saying, “I’ve shown you the way of servanthood and forgiveness, how long till you stop fighting and killing each other?”

When he came to save us, our God chose to do that by becoming a human being, a flesh and blood person. The fact that God became a person teaches us something about the nature of his providence. He doesn’t want to work around us, he doesn’t want to be the one doing all the work, he wants to work through us. He became flesh and blood because flesh and blood is the tool he wants to use to build his kingdom. Flesh and blood is the favorite tool of his providence. That doesn’t mean fixing the world is up to us. Not at all. The passage is clear that most of the work is God’s. The passage makes clear that the power from the work is still God’s. He’s the one who brings the new heavens and the new earth. He’s the main contractor on this restoration job. But we are part of the work crew. And when we do our work, when we feed the hungry and clothe the naked and comfort the hurting and tell the lost that Jesus is Lord, then we speed his coming,

I need to say one more thing tonight. There are many of you here who have been anything but passive. You have not just been sitting on your hands, you have been working to prepare the way. You have given your heart, your soul, your all to the work of the kingdom. You have done everything you can. And now you’re worn out and you’re tired and you’re discouraged because maybe things around you aren’t getting much better. Your hard work isn’t yielding the great results you hoped for. What word is there for you? Well, to return to the analogy of the child cleaning up her room while her mother waits, sometimes your child has done the best she can and can’t do it anymore. The child is exhausted, she’s overwhelmed, she sobs, she shakes, you can hardly communicate with her. You have what in parental terms is a meltdown. What do you do then as a parent? Well, at that point you pick her up and you hold her. You say don’t worry. It’ll be Ok. I’ll take care of the rest.” You say to her, “Would you like a little drink? Can I make you a sandwich? Would that make you feel better?” And then you take this whimpering child into the kitchen and you give her a drink and you hold her on your lap until she calms down.

That’s what parents do with their children and that’s how God deals with us. When we completely lose it, he says ‘How about a little drink? How about a little something to eat? Here is my body. Here is my blood. Just sit with me a little while. Let my grace and strength fill you. Everything will be OK. I promise.’

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