

“Don’t Spoil Your Appetite”

Reading: *Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28*

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The Greeks tell us the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, one of the classic myths of antiquity. Orpheus was a musician, the definitive musician, whose music was so beautiful that no one and nothing could resist being enraptured by it. His beloved wife Eurydice was tragically killed, though, and descended to the realm of the dead. Orpheus was devastated, and in his grief he decided to enter the underworld in search of her. After some adventures, he finally found Eurydice, watched over by Hades, god of the dead, and his wife Persephone. Orpheus’s music was so beautiful and so mournful, however, that it was even able to soften the heart of Hades himself, and Eurydice was allowed to follow her husband back to the land of the living on the one condition that Orpheus did not look back at her until they were both out. If you don’t know the story you might be able to guess its ending, though: Orpheus just couldn’t wait, and when Eurydice was at the threshold of the land of the living, he looked back at her, only to see her taken back to Hades forever.

There is a similar Japanese myth about a god named Izanagi, who descends to the land of the dead to retrieve his sister, Izanami. She warns her brother not to look at her until she is ready to depart, but he gets impatient and looks anyway, only to see her in her dead form and put her to shame. She then chases him out, sending numerous obstacles and enemies against him, and again, on the threshold of the land of the living, they must take their leave of one another. We might also tell the story from our own Bible of Lot and his family, fleeing from the burning ruin of Sodom and Gomorrah, warned by an angel that they can escape with their lives if only they do not look back. But Lot’s wife can’t resist, whether out of curiosity or fear or longing for the home she’s leaving behind we’ll never know, but as soon as she does, she’s turned into a pillar of salt.

There are lots of lessons to be learned from classic tales like these, but at the very least, they remind us that we’re terrible at waiting, we’re terrible at resisting the temptation to jump the gun, and we have been for a very long time. Some of us are more patient than others, whether by nature or by discipline, but waiting is not something that many of us find easy to do. Maybe it’s especially true for us today in our fast-paced, always connected, accomplishment-oriented society. Just waiting feels like such a waste. Let’s turn on the TV or check our phones or read a book while we wait. Our time is so precious that it seems foolish to waste any of it. So if you give me the chance to hurry up and get something *now* rather than later, or even if I have the choice between a good thing now or a better thing later, it’s awfully hard to choose to wait.

But is it possible that sometimes waiting is good for the soul? Is it possible that sometimes it’s good to have an unfulfilled desire? Is it possible that occasionally the best way to use my time might actually be to do nothing but practice the discipline of waiting, longing, expecting? Patient people are virtuous, but few of us want to do what it takes to get that virtue. It’s certainly not easy to do, as Orpheus and Izanagi and Lot’s wife and many others remind us, though they also remind us of the dangers of *not* waiting.

Our reading from John’s gospel today shows us some more people who are tired of waiting, and maybe they’re even so tired of waiting that they’re willing to consider some substitutes for what they’re waiting for. John the Baptist is often a central figure during the season of Advent because he’s

the forerunner or announcer for the Messiah, and he prepares the way for Jesus in our story as we prepare our hearts to look for His return. But John was a striking figure, like someone out of an old story come to life, and so we can only wonder whether he's going to bring with him some of those old story kind of events with him. He lives a dramatic lifestyle, he looks dramatic, he says dramatic things, and he calls people to dramatic change.

The question that is naturally on peoples' minds is what he's up to out there in the wilderness where he's stirring everyone up. He's kind of being an agitator, but no one really knows whose side he's on. So the people in power send some messengers out to him to get a read on just who he thinks he is. We've been waiting for hundreds of years for a Messiah to show up, and we've had a few contenders come along and try to start a rebellion, so, John, are you now claiming to be the Messiah, too? And John answers, clearly and unequivocally, that he is not. Neither is he a return of one of the old prophets like Elijah. For a preacher, John is remarkably brief when it comes to answering these theological questions.

Their next question is, I think, very telling. "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us." They're getting impatient. They can't wait around all day; they need to know what's going on. Hurry up, John, and give us the executive summary. Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us; we've got stuff to do and we need to know how to handle you. If you're not the Messiah, are you good enough for our purposes?

John is kind of toying with them; he's playing that game where you know what someone really wants but you give them the smallest, most literally true answer you can. Their instincts are not wrong that he's someone significant, because John is in fact the forerunner to the long-awaited Messiah. But he refuses to give them a straight answer. They want an answer that will satisfy their bosses, but John will only tell them the real message of the Messiah. He won't let the message of this Messiah fit into a narrative that their power structure can control. They want a Messiah on terms they can understand and maybe even control, while John is preaching a Messiah on the Messiah's own terms.

You see, we're really not very good at waiting. We want to fill the time, we want to fill the longing, and we'd like it right now, thanks very much. Rather than letting God do His work in His time and in His way, these folks are determined to go out and figure things out ahead of time. They're longing for the Messiah, yes, but they want Him on their terms.

It's not unlike one of our Christmas feasts, with so many good things to eat, but everyone is still gathering and the turkey or the ham or whatever isn't quite done yet, and there's a countertop full of appetizers right there to tide you over. Only it doesn't tide you over because you don't want to be hungry anymore, so you eat too many appetizers and are full before the entrée comes out. And then when dessert comes, you've *really* spoiled your appetite. But maybe that's only me. Or maybe you have a story from your childhood of "accidentally" discovering your parents' stash of presents and playing with them long before Christmas, only to have to pretend to be surprised when you receive them on Christmas morning. We're not very good at waiting; we want to rush and hurry and fill the time, and if we're not careful we'll spoil the moment we've been waiting for.

Advent is a season of waiting and expectation. It's not a time of celebration. That begins with Christmas and, in some traditions, continues for a couple of weeks after. But at Advent we wait, and we examine what we're waiting for, and we examine whether we're filling our time with things that are substitutes for what we're waiting on. We should be waiting with an appetite, when our preference is to wait while munching appetizers and shaking the presents to see what's inside. "Give us an answer!" What's going on? What's going to happen? And how much longer do we have to wait? But no, the call of Advent is simply to wait, to wait well, to wait with an appetite, and to make sure our appetite is focused on the true Messiah Himself rather than some substitute. The goal is to stay hungry enough for the entrée, but not so starving that we'll eat whatever we can get our hands on.

These questioners come to John and ask him what's going on, whether he's the Messiah, and what sort of Messiah might be coming. But John, and Jesus after him, turn the questions back against them. At one point later in His ministry, Jesus raises exactly this sort of issue during His preaching. John has been put in prison, and he sends messengers to Jesus to confirm that Jesus is indeed the right Messiah. We can't blame John for needing a little reassurance when it comes to a task as important as his was. And after sending John's messengers back with the evidence they need — the blind have received their sight, the lame are walking, the leprous have been cleansed, and good news has been preached to the poor — Jesus then turns on His audience and asks them, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" What sort of forerunner to the Messiah were you looking for? Because your expectations of the forerunner will say a lot about your expectations of the one who comes after him. Did you want someone rich and powerful? Did you want someone to put on a show? What do you want? Do you want what you want, or do you want what you need? Do you want what you think will satisfy you, or do you want the good things that genuinely come from God and will satisfy you for eternity?

If you want what God really has for you, you will wait for it. If you want God to give you merely what you want, you'll probably be tempted to fill that want with some lesser substitute. And so, in our moments of restlessness and impatience, we tend to settle for created things rather than the Creator Himself. We're willing to take "good enough" rather than Goodness Himself. We accept the distractions and fake messiahs that are here now and we forget that the presence of the Messiah Himself is so much better.

What sorts of things do we spoil our appetite with? In short, we tend to prefer things we can manage and control. We need to take an answer back to those who sent us; whose side are you on? Trusting in the presence of a Messiah whose presence is not always easy to discern and whom we cannot control or predict is, in our impatience, not always preferred. And so we settle for part of the Messiah and His message — we'll take the promise of grace and forgiveness, but ignore the call to repentance. Or we'll take some of the good things that come with the Messiah — let's have the healings and the miracles, and we'll skip the call to love our enemies and give to those who ask of us.

Or maybe we spoil our appetite with those things that are intended to point us on to the Messiah. We might just settle for His forerunner, if he's good enough. We have blessings in our lives that are intended to model Jesus Christ's love and point us to Him, but maybe we'll just settle for that blessing itself. If God blesses me with provision or protection, maybe I'll settle for that instead of Him. In a season filled with symbols of Christ's coming, maybe I'll settle for the symbols instead of the real

person of Jesus Christ. I'll celebrate the celebration, rather than celebrating the reason for the celebration. I'll look at the things that reflect Christ, rather than gazing at Christ Himself.

And in so doing, we're likely to miss the full goodness of the presence of Christ Himself. The waiting may not be easy, but the fulfillment is worth it. We settle for things that remind us of Him when in reality He offers us Himself. We settle for momentary distractions from our deep longing when we can have streams of living water that satisfy and never end.

And so as we come one week closer to the end of Advent and the beginning of Christmas, and as the light in our wreath grows that much brighter in anticipation, examine your appetite. Are you longing for Christ Himself, or are you filling your desire with distractions that may be good but are not Him? What sort of Messiah are you looking for? Are you willing to let Him come to you on His terms, or do you insist on having all the answers and expect Him to come to you on your terms?



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