



"In the Meantime"

Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9

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It's been a strange and difficult week, to say the least. The economy continues its downward spiral. The market is in chaos. Fear, even panic, is sweeping the land. For many of you your job, even your career, is on the line. All of us will experience an unknown future. One thing is certain: this crisis will visit our families, this neighborhood, our church, New York City, and the world.

"Where will it end?" we wonder. "Where is it going?" Of course, none of us know.

This week I received the quarterly report for my 401k – or I should say, my 201k. I told a church committee this week it looks like I can't retire until I'm ninety! A member quickly promised that the church will install a small escalator to get me up here to the pulpit! A little humor helps.

Sometimes the humor is dark. This week I was in Cranberry's Deli waiting for a cup of coffee. A man in line, apparently a contractor, was telling a friend he hasn't had work for two months and he has no prospects for work in the future. Then, to lighten the moment, he said, "I think the Illuminati control Wall Street."

Conspiracy theories aside, forces beyond the control of any of us are at work in the world. Things seem to be spinning out of control. And if there is one thing people like us do not like, it's being out of control. We are successful and success is a matter of controlling information, time, people and environments with a view to the future. The ability to control is an essential of leadership. Most of us spend our lives creating success and securing our futures by exerting control.

When we lose control, as one of you put it, we get cranky. We are also afraid and angry. This is not what we expected nor bargained for.

Most of us believe – and it is an act of faith – that the economy will turn around. At least it always has. But what about life in the meantime? Your jobs are on the line. Pain and suffering will be the cost for millions in our country and the world. And what about the millions of poor and marginalized people who will suffer in the meantime? They matter to God and they should matter to us. This crisis is much more than economic or political. Human lives and welfare are at stake.

It's not pleasant living in an out-of-control world. We are used to being in control, managing our lives and our futures successfully. None of us likes forces beyond our control determining our present and future.

In the meantime, we do our best to order the chaos around and in us while waiting for the other shoe to drop. We are living in an uncertain and dangerous "meantime."

The Bible has much to say about living in the meantime. In fact faith by its nature is a matter of living in the meantime. Both of our Scripture Lessons are stories about life in the meantime.

In the prophet Isaiah's day, Israel was living in the meantime. The golden days of national greatness were a quickly fading memory. The nation was flanked by two Empires in competition with each other. The nation was likely to be crushed as a consequence. The threat was lethal.

Politics and the economy were out of control. God didn't seem to be responding – at least not like expected. The prophets predicted that defeat lay in the future. The people could scarcely comprehend how they could be God's chosen people yet be defeated by pagan powers.

In the meantime, Isaiah had a word from the Lord. His prophecy is in two visions intended to sustain God's people living in a dangerous meantime.

In the first vision, Isaiah sees a ruthless, arrogant Imperial city overthrown and lying in ruins. The prophet knew what all prophets know: power corrupted always collapses on itself. No lie, no matter how powerful the source, can live forever. The wisdom of the ages affirms what modern prophets have declared: the arm of God's providence is long and it bends toward justice.

Isaiah's vision was a true hope. Egypt and Babylon came and went, now consigned to the dustbin of history. The prophets are right.

Then Isaiah offers another vision, a hope that sustains the people of God yet. The prophet sees God's preferred future, a world in which God's will is done on earth. When God is in charge, things are different. Isaiah says that new world is like a sumptuous banquet with excellent food and fine wines. Then, in God's time, the shroud of death that haunts God's people and the world will be taken away and God's peace – shalom – will cover the entire earth. The vision ends with a touching picture: God wiping away the tears from every eye.

The Bible has a lot to say about tears because there's much in the world to cry about. The Psalmist declares that his troubles and sorrow have produced a river of tears. Not long after Isaiah prophesied, another prophet, Jeremiah, watched Jerusalem sacked by the Babylonian army. When it was over, the city leveled and burned, Jeremiah sat on a pile of rubble outside the city, watched the smoke rising, smelled the rotting bodies, and wept for his city, his people, and his nation. "Oh that my eyes were a fountain of tears," he sobbed. "Oh, my people, my people," he cried. That same cry has risen and continues to rise over the centuries.

In the meantime, Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the people of God live in hope. We believe that God is bending history toward its proper end: peace, justice, and righteousness. And in the meantime, God offers spiritual resources for life in the meantime. Hope for one.

The New Testament lesson is a practical version of Isaiah's visionary hope. I've been in prison a few times – not as a prisoner but to visit prisoners. Few experiences in life are filled with greater loss of control. When those doors clang shut behind you, you have lost all control. You are the prisoner of others and a system designed to leave you without control.

Paul the Apostle was in prison. He'd lost everything that made him a success in life. He'd led the Christian movement in an expansion that continues to be nothing short of amazing. He'd imagined a worldwide church when no one else could see beyond the boundaries of race and nation. Almost single-handedly, Paul led the church into the

Roman Empire, where it took hold. In less than a generation, the church was planted across the Mediterranean world.

One of my Jewish professors at Hebrew Union College, Samuel Sandmel, wrote an improbable book titled, *The Genius of St. Paul*. Sandmel disagrees profoundly with Paul but recognizes a one-of-a-kind genius.

At the end of his apostolic career, Paul found himself in Rome, a prisoner of Caesar Nero. The only thing he could continue to manage or control was himself. He'd lost control of everything that had made him a success. His world shrank from the expanse of an Empire to a size of prison cell.

I think it's fair to say that Paul, like most successful people, had control issues. He writes about several of them. He tried without success to control his inner life and failed repeatedly. "Oh wretched man that I am," he wrote, "who will deliver me from this body of death?" Well, he found an answer, but the problem of control continued to haunt him.

In this letter to the church in Philippi, Paul seems embarrassed by his loss of control. A man of some means, he'd managed to make a career without depending on anyone. But now in his time of need, the Philippian church sent him money and someone to care for him, run errands for him, and be with him in the dark hours of imprisonment.

Paul thanks the church – with some hesitation. "Thanks," he writes, "but I've learned how to do without. In fact, I'm looking forward to seeing the reward among you for this generosity. I'm learning to be content no matter what."

Apparently, prison offered Paul a clearer vision of what really counts in life. Interestingly, he begins the letter to Philippi not talking about God, but about his friends in Philippi. During the long hours of confinement, the Apostle thought a lot about people. "I have you in my heart," he writes. "We've been through a lot together. Memories of you sustain me."

The deepest and most profound human resource any of us will ever have are the people we love and who love us. People mixed generously with love are what get us through the dark nights of our lives. Hope lives in love. Life is about one another.

My darkest "in the meantime" was years ago. I'd just entered a doctoral program and it was killing me. Any sense of dignity or pride in myself had been stripped away. I was working part-time for a little country church that was really just a collection of discontented, often mean, people. I tried every professional trick in my small book of them and nothing worked. I couldn't see any light at the end of this tunnel. Meanwhile Gloria was working at another horrible job.

On Friday nights, we'd gather our little family in the living room, sit on the floor, and watch the TV show "Planet of the Apes." Somehow being together made the horror tolerable, even good. We now look back on those Friday nights as one of the joys of our life together.

Paul doesn't stop with loving family and friends. He had one more resource: he could control his mind. So, he adds, "turn all your meantimes over to God in prayer. And the God of peace will guard your heart like a sentinel. So give yourself into God's keeping.

And in the meantime, think straight. Spend quality time thinking about these things: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, anything worthy of praise...and the God of peace will be with you."

Easier said than done? I suppose so. But it's the truth and we know it.

God has earned our trust. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the God who became one of us, lived with us, understands us, and loves us to death. As Paul puts it in another place, "he became poor so we might become rich." God is with us no matter what.

Perhaps the most influential theologian of our time is Jurgen Moltmann. Now retired from the University of Tübingen in Germany, Moltmann began adult life as a German soldier in World War II. Just a teenager, he was drafted into the army in the closing days of the war and sent to the western front. Before he ever fired a shot, he was captured by the British army. He spent the next three years in a prisoner of war camp in Scotland.

The horror and lunacy of war were over. But he felt helpless and hopeless. Everything he knew was lost. As he puts it, "We had escaped the inferno but now were behind barbed wire. Cold despair laid a ring around my heart. We lost all hope."

But there, to his surprise, God found Jurgen Moltmann. All his life, Moltmann been a secular man. His first personal engagement with Christian faith was when Scottish Christians came to the camp to serve the soldiers. Without the condemnation he expected, they helped men from an army that had tried to annihilate them. He was shocked by their Christian hospitality.

The British supplied the prisoners with chaplains to care for their spiritual needs. One of them gave Moltmann a Bible. In desperation Moltmann read it. He found himself in its pages.

I read the story of the passion [Jesus' suffering and death]; when I heard Jesus cry, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely; who is with you in your cry to God...I began to understand the assailed, forsaken Christ because I knew that he understood me. The divine brother in need...who goes with you through this 'valley of the shadow of death...." This early companionship with Jesus, the brother in suffering...has never left me since, and I became more and more assured of it....after almost 60 years, I am certain that then, in 1945, and there, in the Scottish prisoner of war camp, in the dark pit of my soul, Jesus sought me and found me...he came to me when I was lost.

That, dear people of God, is the truth.

Amen.