

Blessed are Those who Wait
Sermon on the Occasion of the 175th Anniversary of
Grace Episcopal Church, Baldwinsville, NY by
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Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favor, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally, by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

... those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles... Isaiah 40:31.

Late in his life, The Rev. James Hopewell, in his wonderful book, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, described what he saw when he took a close look at Christian Churches. He found himself listening carefully to the stories that surrounded him in the church. A Professor of Religion and the Church at Emory University, Hopewell had spent much of his early ministry overseas in missionary and ecumenical work where he undertook a thorough study of Islam and the religions of Africa and Asia. What he saw in Christian congregations when he returned to the states caught his attention and led him to record what he heard. As he looked closely at local congregations he discovered that they had collections of stories with common themes that expressed the kind of faith found among their members. Over time he gathered those stories together, studied them carefully and concluded that there were four principle types of stories, with one of the story-types predominating in each congregation. The stories expressed the world-view of the congregation and described the way faith was experienced in the local setting. He named these four faith worldviews: Charismatic, Canonic, Empiric and Gnostic. In any given situation facing a congregation, Hopewell observed, one

could pretty much predict the expectations the congregation would have, and the choices they would make, based on the stories they told.

It is not important for me to define these four faith worldviews here. What is useful for our purposes today is to note that Hopewell discovered the patterns of what we might call the personality, or the spiritual DNA of local congregations. Anyone who has hung around the local church for any time whatsoever will know what I am speaking of. Every congregation has a personality. That personality plays itself out generation after generation. Many young clergy have seen their ministries crash and burn thinking they can change a congregation's personality. It is not possible to do that, to change congregational personality. It is too embedded in the life and history of a place. It is part of its spiritual DNA. One can work with it, perhaps help it be spiritually healthy, but the personality is fixed. I recall a young evangelical minister I met in a small town in the southern tier many years ago. He was struggling in his first church. It was small and unresponsive and he did not know what to do. He said to me, "I thought all I had to do was preach Jesus with conviction and people would flock to church." Young man, things are a lot more complicated than that.

Churches have personalities. How might we discover the personality of a church - say a church like ... Grace Church in Baldwinsville? One way we might do it is by doing what Jim Hopewell did, by listening to Grace Church's stories, found in its history, and by seeking to identify the patterns that keep repeating themselves. The written records and published history of a congregation contain many, many stories. Those stories have meaning. Out of all the things that happen in the life of a parish, I believe, certain stories are preserved in the written memory because they express something about that church. It is no accident that some stories are remembered and others are not. When seen in this light, little insignificant things take on great meaning. Let me give you an example. When

the first Grace Church was dedicated in 1860 the Vestry had to apologize to those who came because defective paint on the pews transferred to their clothing. That may just seem a charming (from a distance) story to keep track of, but might it have a deeper meaning? Might it say something about the experience of the congregation having things come together and then something goes wrong, there is a hitch of some sort? One wonders, because that seems to be so much the story of this congregation. Little stories express the meaning of larger stories - the personalities of congregations.

Let's take this a little further. I personally know a good part of the history of this congregation back to the 1950's. Carol George's wonderful compilation tells the rest of the story back to the 1830s. And in that long story there is a repeating pattern of starts and stops. Just when things get going, something happens and everything stops. There are exceptions to that pattern, to be sure, one of them quite long, but the pattern is there to see if one looks closely. Consider the following:

- In Carol George's words, "For the first twenty-seven years of its corporate life, Grace Church went through a difficult and often frustrating transition."
- Grace Church was the first church in Baldwinsville to be incorporated, on August 3, 1835, but it had no church building for 25 years.
- In a denomination that required the presence of clergy more than most, during those 25 years, Grace Church went through periods, some as short as a few months, one as long as three years, without clergy. Times of interruption. Times of waiting.
- Services in those early years were happenstance. Some took place in homes, some in lodge halls, some in local church buildings. But they had one thing in common. There were times when there were services and times when

there were not. A missionary would come along and get things started and then suddenly leave for other pastures. More interruptions. More waiting.

- In 1853, without clergy leadership, the tiny congregation decided it was time to build a church building. The women organized fundraising, and on August 11 a ground breaking was held on property on Elizabeth Street. Finally! ...However, the building, while under construction, was destroyed by a violent storm that crumpled it, roof and all. Interruption again. More waiting.
- This delayed construction for two years, at which time the foundation was found to have crumbled because of unstable ground. It was 1860 before another attempt could be made, this time successful. Interruption and waiting.
- Clergy came and went until 1865, when The Rev. William Beauchamp arrived. He stayed until 1900. During that long tenure, finally, Grace Church seemed to put behind itself its start-and-stop history. The congregation thrived and the building was improved in many ways.
- However, when The Rev. Mr. Beauchamp left in 1900, there ushered in a thirty-year period of clergy coming and going again, with one exception. Further improvements were made to the building, but the life of the congregation was disrupted. To make things more interesting, the High Church (Anglo-Catholic) movement was moving forward in many places and began to have an impact on the way things were done at Grace Church. Times of interruption and waiting returned.
- In 1930, The Rev. Roderic Pierce came to Grace Church from St. Paul's Church in Endicott. The Rev. Mr. Pierce was a talented musician and very interested in Anglo-Catholic liturgy. During his tenure the churchmanship

issue came to a head. The high water mark seemed to have been when the Vestry determined to put “religious pictures” (read - “stations of the cross”) in the church. The congregation’s reaction was, well, utterly negative. The Vestry removed them. While membership remained stable, attendance dropped, giving followed and the High Church members left. Grace Church was struggling. Another interruption. Another time of waiting.

- It was not until the tenure of The Rev. George Entwisle, who arrived in 1949, that the congregation began to recover. By the mid-1950s, things were beginning to go well again, but in 1959, the Rector left - ironically for St. Paul’s Church in Endicott, from which Fr. Pierce had come. Another interruption. Another time of waiting.
- George Dawson arrived early in 1960 and it seemed that things would be back on track, but a terrible fire destroyed the church building during the month of its centennial. The congregation would have to start all over again, in a new location. Another interruption. Another time of waiting.
- From the 1960s into the first decade of the new century, Grace Church struggled with all the things the rest of the Episcopal Church struggled with, but it made good progress and began to grow under the leadership of several fine clergy.
- In this year of 2010, however, Grace Church seems to have reached another interruption, another time of waiting.

You get the picture. Grace Church’s history is filled with times of breaks in the flow of its life, accompanied by times of waiting. This is not the only pattern in its history, to be sure, but waiting certainly seems to be a strong theme across the years - 175 of them now. It is in your spiritual DNA.

Now, I don't know if you have noticed, but human beings do not much like to WAIT. Waiting is a challenge to the human spirit. Waiting wears on the nerves. People get anxious, and all too often someone, somewhere, tries to force things. That never plays out well. When God's people try to call the shots, things unravel.

So what might we learn from the history and personality of this congregation that would be useful to us today? Certainly times of waiting in the life of Grace Church were disruptive to the flow of things, but still the work of God has gone on and on. Times of waiting can undo a congregation, but they can also enrich the life of Christian people almost beyond belief. That is because it is in the midst of waiting, right when we get the most anxious, that we are given a most wonderful opportunity to choose FAITH. It is times exactly like this that we have to make a decision. Will we allow our anxiety to lead us into being controlling and prickly people, and to make poor decisions, or will we choose to trust God with the future of the church we love, and trust God with our very lives and welfare - to DEEPLY trust God, in every respect possible? To use a modern phrase - here is where the pedal hits the metal. This is where we decide whether or not we are going to be a Christian people. And on this day on which pledge cards are to be received, it will be well to note that it is this kind of faith on which REAL stewardship rests. Think what confidence those early members of Grace Church had in God to do what they did, to stick with things the way they stuck with them. Can you do any less?

But can God really be trusted? Certainly there are some things in life that might make us wonder, but those who have faced those kinds of situations down (and there are a lot of people in the congregation who have) know that when we stick with God in the midst of the difficult we have a most profound experience of the holy - of God's love, of God's GRACE. This congregation's name takes on special meaning in this respect.

Certainly as we look back over the last 175 years, God has never once abandoned Grace Church. I am sure that when the first attempt at building a church ended in disaster in 1853, people must have wondered. When a beloved 35 year Rector left, people must have wondered. When things were dark in the post-war years, people must have wondered. And perhaps especially when the church burned in 1960 people must have wondered. But look at the history. The spirit of Jesus Christ has stood strong in the midst of this congregation for a long, long time. And he continues to stand strong among you today. From a very sparse beginning this parish grew into a wonderful kind of richness of faith and ministry. There has been a lot of change, periods of incredible stress, and repeated breakthroughs. Who might you think AUTHORED those breakthroughs? The same Jesus that brought you here will continue to lead you for at least another 175 years. Waiting is your history. It is also your opportunity for deep growth in faith. Waiting is your history, and it is also your future.

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