

## Waiting a Minute & Waiting All Our Lives

2 Peter 3:8-15 (We wait for new heavens and a new earth.)

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John and I have found a haven in the Anza Borrego Desert, about 2 hours from here. We discovered it 5 years ago and have gone back for short visits often. We just spent Thanksgiving there this year. The desert, filled with God's fascinating creations, has been a whole new world for us to explore.

Two plants, especially, have given me pause.

Usually I follow John when we hike along one of the hundreds of trails in the desert. During one of our first hikes there, I yelled out to him, "Wait a minute." My jacket, that was wrapped around my waist, had gotten caught up on a bush that I was passing. It just took a minute to disconnect myself from the plant and to start walking again. Later that day John bought a book, *Shrubs and Trees of the Southern California Deserts*.<sup>i</sup> We looked up the name of the bush that had snagged me--it was easy because they had pictures of it--and discovered that it was called the "Wait-a-minute" bush! No Kidding!

It's also called the Catclaw.<sup>ii</sup> "It's a scraggly shrub . . . with branches that are armed with . . . [tiny] claw-like thorns. . . " John's book explains the name of this shrub derives from the fact that its thorns, "when snagged on clothing . . . often elicit the request that others' 'wait-a-minute.'"

I mentioned that two desert plants that I've come to know have given me pause.

The other one is the Agave, or Century plant. There are lots and lots of these plants around. You even see quite a few here in Redlands. They are a rosette of leaves growing directly from the ground. The plants are only maybe a foot and a half tall. They live to be somewhere between 20 and 40 years old. People knew they lived a long time, and accidentally thinking they lived 100 years, people called them "century" plants. These Agave plants hadn't caught my attention or my clothing, until I learned one important fact about them. Each plant has one, and only one flower, its whole life long. Although the plant is just 1 ½ feet tall, the flower is 6 to 15 feet tall! After the plant blooms with its one flower, it dies.

One plant I met in the desert caught my clothing, so that I called out "Wait-a-minute!"

The other plant I learned about grows to be very old and waits all its lifetime to bloom.

Thinking about these two very different ways of waiting has been quite helpful in my own spiritual journey, and thinking about kinds of waiting is probably helpful for all of us during Advent.

We say we are "waiting," whether the time period of the wait is a brief pause or a long delay. We push the "pause" button on ipods or DVD players, and they pause only for a little while. We wait for what seems like a very long time until graduation, or until we meet "the right person," or until we hear whether we get the job we think we want. Sometimes we do wait all of our lives for a particular "good." I wonder whether the Agave plant knows it's going to bloom, eventually, all the while it is waiting. We humans

hope, but we are not necessarily guaranteed that something we might wait for all our lives will actually ever bloom.

Our Scripture passage is the very end of the letter we know as 2 Peter. This letter was not written by the same person who wrote 1 Peter and was not written by Peter. One conclusion by scholars is that this letter was probably Paul's last letter. What we do know is that by the time this letter was written, an entire generation of Christians had waited and waited for the world to be transformed. They were not sure exactly how it would happen, but they had waited and waited and waited for a "new heaven and a new earth." It was Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, who had promised this good for the earth. He had said, "soon," but the transformation had not yet had not yet happened.

The author of this letter, perhaps Paul, offers an explanation that he hopes will encourage the Christians to continue to wait: to God one day is like a thousand years.<sup>iii</sup> That is, what seems like "forever" to us humans may be "soon" to God.<sup>iv</sup> Another view, shared by some Christians, was that maybe God was being very patient with us humans, that God was waiting and waiting and waiting until humans would shape up and behave cooperatively.

My introduction to the two desert plants prompted for me a lot of thought about waiting. *I realized that sometimes we get into conundrums because we mix up our kinds of waiting.*

If I were to get snagged by a "wait-a-minute" bush and instead of realizing it was not a big deal, I became frantic about my predicament, then I might yell out to John, "Our hike is ruined. I'll be all day getting out of this." If I were hysterical, I might scream, "I'll NEVER get undone from this stupid bush." You see, I've mixed up a "wait-a-minute" kind of waiting with a very long wait.

If, on the other hand, I took a turkey sandwich with me for lunch as I sat down to wait to watch an Agave plant bloom, I'd probably be in for a very long lunch, and wait . . . There again, I've mixed up my kinds of "wait."

*Sometimes we do mix up our "waits." We panic about a problem, thinking it will be "forever" before we can get over it, when perhaps we will not have to wait as long as we fear. Other times we wait, expecting that something will occur soon, only to discover that it may be a very long wait indeed.*

I recall that up until I was 29, I kept thinking that I might find the man to marry soon. At thirty, I realized it may be a very long time, or not happen at all. So, I decided not to wait, to be the person I wanted to be as a single person. Then, oddly enough, I met John and we married, when I was 31!

How do we know if a dilemma requires a minute-wait or a life-time wait? How do we know whether to give up on waiting?

Are we "waiting-a-minute" or "waiting-a-lifetime" to find our passion, to find a great friend, to express ourselves, to be really healthy, to be of service to others?

On a collective level, how long do we wait for the "really big" things? We tend to focus upon really big waiting during the time of year when we "wait" for the celebration of the "birth" of Christ. But, gee whiz, we ask ourselves all year long questions that are similar to those asked by the disciples who received this letter that is named after Peter: "God, when will there be peace? Not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but all over the world? When will we all use conflict-mediation instead of weapons? When will

“weapons of mass destruction” to be transformed into “weapons of miniscule destruction”?

Early Christians thought they were “waiting-a-minute” for peace. They thought it was right around the corner. I’m not so sure that most of us really feel we are actively waiting for the blooming of peace before we die, even if that’s a century from now. Do we live so expectantly that we actually wonder whether we will live to see peace bloom? Even better, do we wait so expectantly that we pick up the morning paper or go on-line to see whether the headlines are there yet, “Peace to all, on earth”?

The author of 2 Peter advised his second generation Christians to behave, as they waited, as well as they would when the wonderful time would come for which they were waiting. That is, do now what you would do then! That makes sense. If we all acted cooperatively now, as we waited for peace, lo and behold, there would be peace! Voila!

Slaves in the United States sometimes were told--in Christian churches--to wait until they reached heaven to have justice. Finally, enough Christians realized that they had to work for justice now. We have to live on earth as in heaven to make heaven come on earth.

I realized how I had become lazy with my muscles of expectancy, when I reacted to reading about the words of the Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2006, Mohammad Yunus. His words have stuck with me. He commented that he looked forward to the day when we would know about poverty only by going to “Poverty Museums.”

Sometimes the solution to our frustrated waiting is to wait *with* what we are waiting *for*. A simple example is for us to lovingly wait in line to purchase gifts that celebrate the birth of the One who taught us to wait lovingly!

*Or, to wait healthfully for healing. To wait cooperatively for cooperation. To wait patiently for patience. To wait hopefully for hope.*

As you ponder your waiting--what you might be waiting for along time and what you may be waiting for only a brief time, I’m going to add another conundrum about waiting. To introduce this conundrum, I share another illustration that includes a plant.

The famous painter, Georgia O’Keefe, had a great love for the plant world, especially flowers. Most of us probably think of her in connection with her huge flower paintings. On one occasion, a visitor came to see her unexpectedly. She refused to see the visitor because she had to complete the still life she was working on “before the flower wilted.”<sup>v</sup>

O’Keefe made her visitor wait. But, think of it, that was because she “couldn’t wait.” Why? Because she had such passion for painting the beauty of the flower she beheld.

May we be able to wait, realistically, *however long we really need to wait*. May we also “not be able to wait” when we *must* express beauty, or we must work for justice on earth. Being able to wait, a minute, or a life time is good. But, it is also good not to be able to wait, if what we’re impatient for is a “new” earth, modeled after the vision of the Prince of Peace.

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<sup>i</sup> Jim W. Dole and Betty B. Rose, *An Amateur Botanist’s Identification Manual for the Shrubs and Trees of the Southern California Deserts*. North Hills, CA: Foot-loose Press, 1996.

<sup>ii</sup> *Acacia greggii*

<sup>iii</sup> with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and thousand years are like one day.

<sup>iv</sup> Ps. 90:4 “For a thousand years in your sight/are like yesterday when it is past,/or like a watch in the night” NRSV

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<sup>v</sup> “The grace and charm exuded by O’Keeff’s flowers may be seen as an expression of her great love for the plant world. Her respect for the life of the individual flower was similarly reflected in her behaviour: on one occasion . . . “*O’Keeffe*,” by Britta Benke, p. 32-37