October 18, 2009 Year B
Waiting on God
Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church

For the past few months, the elders have been talking about a congregational theme for the next year. At the retreat, Waiting on God began to emerge as a theme—Waiting on God: Being Emptied/Being Filled. You've likely read it in the minutes. As we've been planning for the upcoming congregational meeting, we've been shaping the theme, thinking not only about how to introduce it, but also about the ways and places this theme might shape us, as individuals and as a congregational community. In the meantime, the theme has already been at work, at least in me! And it has shaped this sermon. So, while the congregational meeting is still a week or two away, the sermon this morning is about waiting, getting us ready, getting us started in the work of the coming year.

It is the person and character of Job that offers images of waiting on God. Typically we think of waiting as a relatively passive state—we wait in line, we wait for someone who's late, we wait at a traffic light. Waiting is the space between where I am now and the place I want to be or the thing I want to do. Waiting is an in-between space. But Job offers other ways to think about waiting. Job's waiting on God is active, engaged waiting.

Our Job lectionary Text this week which we heard is from chapter 38, where God answers Job, out of a whirlwind no less. Since chapter 3 Job has been waiting, waiting on God for an answer. 35 chapters are a long wait, especially having to sit through the long, patronizing speeches of Job's friends. And when God finally breaks the silence, the answer is likely not what Job was expecting. Instead of God answering Job's questions... instead of God giving a defense or explanation of what happened to Job and why it happened... instead God asks Job questions: Who? What? Where? When? Have you? In beautiful poetry the

Creator questions the creature. With questions that paint the magnificence and mystery and beauty of creation. God's answer to Job's questions are not explicit, linear explanations, but Job hears the answer to his questions. In the whirl and swirl of God's Word, Job hears the answer to his demands. Job gets what God is saying. It isn't so much that he understands but it becomes clear to him that as the creature he can never understand the Mystery of Creator. And his waiting ends; this season, this cycle of his waiting ends.

But let's step back and take a closer look at Job, at the nature of his waiting on God. At the end of chapter 2, Job has lost everything—his family, his friends, his wealth, and his health. He does still have the out of town friends who come to sit in ashes with him. Chapter 2 ends, "They sat with [Job] on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." Seven days and seven nights of suffering. Seven days and seven nights of silence. Seven days and seven nights of waiting.

A week of silence is a long time. The duration of time here, rather than a week, is the time for completion, for fullness. Just as creation was finished, was complete in seven days, so Job sat in silence until it was finished, until it was complete, until the fullness of time. There's no indication in the Text about what Job did or said during those 7 days and 7 nights. But we can imagine... we can imagine the paralysis of pain, the numbness of loss, the shock and disbelief. We can imagine time standing still, dizzying disorientation, mechanical motions just to get through the day. We can imagine sleepless nights, restless sleep, disturbing dreams. These are endlessly long days and nights of waiting. And then he speaks. His voice—his breath and spirit—the only thing he has left. And he uses it.

At the end of 7 days and 7 nights, Job finds his voice and begins to lament, "Perish the day on which I was born.... May God above have no concern for it." Friends and therapists today would surely be concerned about his depression. But this is more than depression. This is utter darkness. This is the cross and he's crying for the relief of the tomb. He ends his lament in chapter 3 v 24, "My groaning serves as my bread; My roaring pours forth as water." Job's waiting has moved from stupored silence to lament, filled with groaning and roaring. His waiting has become active, engaged, demanding.

His waiting is also filled with listening, listening to his friends. But his friends offer little comfort, insisting, "Do not reject the discipline of the Almighty." Job may be suffering, but he is not cowering. He may be waiting on an answer from God, but he will not settle for false, easy answers—from his friends, himself, or God. He will not admit to that which isn't true. In ch 27 v 4 Job responds to Bildad, "My lips will speak no wrong, Nor my tongue utter deceit. … Until I die I will maintain my integrity." The source of Job's strength and wisdom is deep, grounded in his relationship with God. Even now, he will keep his integrity. Doing less would be the easy thing to do, but God has been his Source during his lifetime; his formation won't let him take the easy way out. He is strong enough to bear this cross.

While his body may be sick and tortured, his spirit has regained it strength and his breath gives voice to his growing anger, demanding in ch 6 v 29, "Relent! Let there not be injustice; Relent! I am still in the right. Is injustice on my tongue? Can my palate not discern evil?" His anger moves from Eliphaz the Temanite to God at the end of ch 7, "If I have sinned, what have I done to You, Watcher of [humanity]? Why make of me Your target." Why, God, why?

Job confronts God, boldly, aggressively, fearlessly. He claims the full rights of his humanity. Unlike Bildad the Shuhite who speaks of being human by saying, "How much less [humanity], a worm, The son-of-[humanity], a maggot, " unlike this friend's low view of what it means to be human, Job's wisdom and relationship with God give him a certainty and a knowing that he is created in the image of God. Created in God's image, Job demands, he requires a response of his God. Ch 13 v 3, "Indeed, I would speak to the Almighty; I insist on arguing with God."

In Job's argument we hear his assumptions—he assumes there is a cause and effect relationship at work that is the source of his suffering. He assumes that this cross he is bearing is a result of sin and that if God were to forgive him, he would experience relief. He assumes that if or when God answers that he will be able to understand. He assumes he has the right and the ability to know and understand. Ch 31 v 35, "O that I had someone to give me a hearing; O that Shaddai would reply to my writ, Or my accuser draw up a true bill!" Job's waiting on God isn't passive or submissive; it is urgent and angry, confrontational and demanding. "Yet know that God has wronged me... I cry 'Violence!' but am not answered; I shout, but can get no justice" (19.6). It is a time for Job to put his card on the table, speak his anger and frustration, to give voice to his pain and loss, and to reveal his expectations and assumptions about life and about God.

When we're waiting on God, it is a good thing for us to give voice to our emotions, whatever they are. It is a good thing for us to expose our expectations and assumptions to God. When we do so...whether revealing them through lament or demands or pleas...it's necessary to give voice to our beliefs and desires. In the Mark story, James and John name their wishes. They want to be vice-president and secretary of state when Jesus is made

president! Their expectation is that Jesus will be crowned king and given a kingdom and they assume that as part of his inner circle, they should be given positions of power. It's an incredibly bold and direct request that they make. But how else can their mistaken assumptions be revealed? In voicing their desires they exposed their assumptions. They open themselves. And Jesus responded by teaching them about the nature of the Kingdom of God.

Job, in ch 31 reveals his assumptions, lists an inventory of his expectations: "Calamity is surely for the iniquitous; Misfortune, for the worker of mischief. Surely the Eternal observes my ways, Takes account of my every step. Have I walked with worthless [people], Or my feet hurried to deceit? Let the Eternal weigh me on the scale of righteousness; Let God ascertain my integrity. If my feet have strayed from their course, My heart followed after my eyes, And a stain sullied my hands, May I sow, but another reap, May the growth of my field be uprooted!"

In the midst of Job's confrontation with God, at the peak of his argument with God, he opens himself. As if he hasn't experienced enough loss, Job steps into vulnerability, opening himself to God, asking God to tell him the truth, asking God to tell him what he hasn't been able to see in himself. He is ready to listen in a way that he hasn't been before. But in the end, it isn't about being weighed on the "scale of righteousness." The turn Job's life took had nothing to do with him straying from his course or from sullied hands. What Job heard out of the whirlwind with clarity as that he is the creation, and God the Creator.

This new knowledge didn't diminish his loss or ease his pain. But it provided for him a way to move into new life, from the cross to resurrection. Once Job saw that the premise of his expectations was false, he could move beyond being upset and angry. Once he saw

that God wasn't punishing him for some unknown sin, Job could be comforted by his Creator. When Job's waiting ended, his pain hadn't necessarily diminished, but his wisdom and capacity for Mystery had increased. And he was, once again, willing to be vulnerable. Knowing the reality and new possibility of pain and loss, he chose, once again, to love and have a family. That kind of vulnerability is possible only with deep roots, roots nourished with Living Water and Living Bread.

Job's waiting on God was an active engagement, demanding much not only from God but from himself as well. He asked hard questions of God and hard questions of himself. But he didn't get there immediately. His waiting began in silence...7 days and 7 nights of silence...that was all he could do initially. His waiting moved through stages and when he was ready, he opened himself. When he was ready he opened himself to hearing the Word of the Living God speaking Truth he couldn't hear before. He was ready to see truth about himself and life that he couldn't see before.

As we enter into a season of waiting, Job can be our teacher and one of our companions. Our journeys of waiting will look different, for each of us. But whatever they look like, let us be engaged—whether in 7 days and 7 nights of silence, whether in confrontation with God, whether in praise and awe before God—may we be willing to open ourselves, to make our lives and beings vulnerable before God, to expose that which wants to remain hidden. May we experience anew what it means to be creation in relationship with Creator. May we know and claim ourselves as created in the image of the Creator, giving ourselves, opening ourselves to the Living God. May we, in each time of our lives, know the freedom of the cross and the eternal life of the resurrection.

Amen.