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Texts: Psalm 84: 1-7; Psalm 130: 5-6; Mark 13: 36-37

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### The Waiting Game

This week, I came across a translation of Psalm 84 from the Book of Common Prayer, one that gave the Psalm an inflection I hadn't noticed before.<sup>1</sup> We heard it read just now, but one verse in particular came to feel critical for Advent. "Blessed is the one who, going through the vale of misery, uses it for a well," the Psalm says. The translation of the Bible that we tend to use, the NRSV, uses an obscure phrase, the Valley of Baca, for "vale of misery," a place that may well have been associated with an exceptionally difficult passage along a pilgrim trail to Jerusalem. "The Valley of Baca" is a more accurate rendering, I'm sure, but the Book of Common Prayer captures the meaning behind the phrase, which I repeat again: Blessed is the one who, going through the vale of misery, uses it for a well.

It's a powerful phrase, containing the very core of what it means to grow in wisdom and understanding. It's not simply that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. It's not the power of positive thinking, nor is it a shallow and sunny optimism. Instead, it has to do with recognizing that various moments of every life passage will take us through the Valley of Baca, the vale of misery, a passage that might last for some time. And it has to do with recognizing that it is in and through such passages that we stand a chance of becoming who we most truly are. Such life passages do not last forever, and often, looking back, they become the defining experiences of our lives. With enough spiritual discipline and insight, we can use such experiences for a well.

Advent is a waiting game. It's not just waiting for Christmas to arrive. It's far more existential than that. Come thou long expected Jesus, we sing, which is a way of saying that we have been waiting, for a long time, for those things that would signal the arrival of Christ into our world – waiting for peace, waiting for justice, waiting for well-being, for human flourishing, for equity and for happiness. The season of Advent teaches us to dwell with purpose in that long duration of waiting. It teaches us that the vale of misery might be used as a well, which is, I think, a part of what it means for Christ to enter the world.

Meanwhile, we're living through our own kind of waiting game. It's a long duration of uncertainty, with a pandemic that is soon to enter its second year, and a virus that keeps mutating. It's the long duration of economic instability, a period in which democracy itself seems to be teetering. How long, O Lord, we wonder? How long? We sigh out a prayer for our poor, stricken world: Come, thou long expected Jesus.

Might it be for you and for me exactly as the Psalmist says? Might it be that we have the capacity to turn this period of our lives, this journey through the valley of Baca, this painful passage through the veil of misery, into a well? Would that not be the very essence of what it means to be a people of Advent waiting?

Not long ago, I heard a profound story about waiting which I'd like to share with you today. Strange though it will sound at first, it began to feel like a parable of Advent the more I considered it. It was the story of a man named Michael Scott Moore, a journalist who was held in

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Wells, "Coming, Ready or Not: The Character of Advent Hope," from the *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2021, pgs. 9-13. Wells was a helpful source for the framing of this sermon.

captivity by Somali pirates for nearly three years.<sup>2</sup> Though it's more dramatic than anything most of us have experienced, Moore has Advent wisdom to convey, ways that he turned his vale of misery into a well. I'll extract a few of those lessons from his story. But first, let me set the scene for you.

While on assignment in Somalia, and under heavy protection, Moore was kidnapped, and held for ransom for 977 days. Nearly six months of that time was spent on an aging ocean freighter, while more than two years was spent in remote prison houses surrounded by armed guards. He had no distractions – no viewing material, no reading material, nothing on which to write, and nothing to listen to, at least initially. And so to keep his mind active, he trained himself to remember passages from his own writing with which he was unsatisfied. He would rewrite them in his head. Then he would memorize them. The next day, he would go through all the changes, word for word, all in his head, just to make sure he remembered them, and then move on to further passages. Eventually, he encountered another captive, a Filipino man, who passed along a Bible. Moore said he devoured it, reading it cover to cover twice. Finally, his captors did allow him a notebook in which to write, but he was heavily censored. For the most part, those 977 days of captivity were filled with waiting, wondering when, wondering if, his ordeal would ever end.

Moore said that several things helped him through that time. Each of them, I believe, was a way of using that veil of misery for a well. The first thing that helped was a hard-won form of detachment, which he associated with Stoicism. Now, there's a popular misconception of Stoicism that claims that it's about having a stiff upper lip and just getting through something unpleasant by sheer force of will. But that's not really an accurate representation of Stoicism, nor is it what appealed to Moore. For him, it had to do with feeling whatever he felt, going through whatever he was going through, but having enough presence of mind not to be submerged, or tanked, by his emotions. Above all, he had to learn not to trust too firmly in either hope or despair, for both were fleeting. That may sound counter-intuitive to many of us. We tend to trust that, at certain points in our lives, hope is the only thing that sees us through. And there are times that that's true. But Moore was in a very different place, where a different kind of wisdom was necessary. He needed something that provided him with the freedom to acknowledge just how bad things actually were, but then also to find a stable dwelling place even within that terrible situation. He needed a place where he would not be yanked between the highs and lows of hope and despair. And so he did his best simply to live in the present, responding to the needs of the moment – filled neither with regret toward the past, nor with any particular expectations for the future. He did his best to control those projections, forward or backward, and to live in the now.

That's an important lesson for you and for me just now. We don't know – we can't know – how our stories will play out in the coming year, or years. We're living through terribly uncertain times, and while we can certainly learn from the past, and while we can work to avert certain possible futures, there's much that remains outside our control. One of the greatest pieces of suffering that many of us feel at the moment has to do with our inability to control many of the most important stories taking place around us now. Try though we might, we're not in control.

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<sup>2</sup> Moore's story can be found in several formats: in print, it can be found by reading *The Desert and the Sea: 977 Days Captive on the Somali Pirate Coast* (New York: HarperWave, 2019); Moore tells his story in audio form, though with a particular focus on music, on the podcast "Is It Rolling, Bob?" (Oct. 3, 2021); and in video form, he tells his story in a TED Talk (TEDxBeacon Street, Dec. 19, 2016). Much of what I offer depends upon the latter two sources.

Faced with such conditions, Stoicism has been an attractive option for many people across the centuries, including to people of Christian faith. That's because it feels like that all important affirmation from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, a letter composed, by the way, from his own captivity. In it, he affirms that nothing, not hardship or persecution, not famine or nakedness, not distress or the sword, not even death itself could separate him, or any of us, from the love of God found in Christ. That's not Stoicism, but it's not far from it either.<sup>3</sup> It's a recognition that no matter how good or bad things may be, no matter the highs and lows we may feel in our emotional lives, we are grounded and rooted in a love that holds us all fast. No matter what, we trust that God is holding us, and is holding the world, even and especially through moments of difficulty and pain. That's an insight we need in this, our own long duration. It's an insight born of Advent waiting.

Here's another thing that helped Moore during, and after, his long captivity: laughter. He admits that it was often very difficult to laugh during that time, but in one crucial instance, he was caught off guard by something that made his sides ache with laughter. It happened when he heard a random news report, on a radio that one of his captors had playing. It was an utterly absurd story of a giant inflatable rubber duckie, some 7 stories tall. It was to be a part of a floating parade in the Bay of Hong Kong. Only it turned out some birds, real birds now, felt threatened, and they actually attacked it. They pecked at it until it just popped. The whole thing was so absurd, so silly, so otherworldly, that he dissolved into laughter. Now, we may or may not recognize the humor in that particular situation, but Moore said it was utterly therapeutic for him, for laughter was a way of finding release from the painful immediacy of what he was going through, of stepping outside of it, and then dwelling within a different emotional sphere, if only for a time. Laughter was the pinprick that deflated the seriousness of his condition, and his self-involvement in it. It was another way of using his experience for a well.

That too has to do with Advent, and with Christmas itself. Earlier eras understood Advent and Christmas to function in precisely the way those birds functioned – pricking, and deflating, the pretensions of the proud and powerful in a grand comedic gesture. That's why Mary's Magnificat has always been associated with Carnival. And it's why Christmas used to look and feel carnivalesque. The powerful were ridiculed. The privileged were mocked. The playing field was leveled, and the lowly and the ordinary folk of the earth were rulers, if only for a day.

But I think laughter, somehow pricking the pretensions of the present, is an important insight for us as well. It's such a grim and serious thing, to wait. Perhaps laughter is one of the things we most need right now, as a kind of spiritual intervention. When was the last time you laughed, truly laughed, about something? When I asked myself that question, I confess I had a hard time recalling. But then I went and visited my guitar teacher, Joe. Joe is a seasoned and devoted student of the instrument who spent years in barrooms practicing his craft. Now, I make a lot of mistakes when I play, for I don't practice nearly as often as I should. In the spirit of confession, I must tell you that when I make those mistakes, an expletive will sometimes escape my lips. Joe knows what I do for a living. He knows that I am a minister. And those expletives never fail to make him laugh. Sometimes I egg him on, and then he'll do the same, and before long, we're like two children out behind the shed, sharing all the bad words we know. It's hopelessly immature, but it's also very funny, at least to us. And it serves as a momentary relief for the burdens we both carry – he of a full round of medical appointments for a chronic illness, and me from the daily cares of work and parenting, to say nothing of navigating a global pandemic. We need such moments. They are a therapy for the self-serious, a release for the

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I am following an insight made by Sam Wells. See JFP, Advent 2021, pg. 11.

burdened, a momentary balm for wearied spirits. And so I offer this as pastoral counsel: in this season of waiting, during these years filled with heaviness and tension, find ways to laugh. Be shameless. Make yourself as a child, and laugh. Laughter is the ironic distance that we need from the expectations and burdens of a relentless moment in our shared history.

There's one more insight that I wish to extract from Michael Scott Moore's tale. Moore said that he spent a lot of time feeling angry and scared during his captivity. And he said that anger was stoked every time he saw his captors pray, which they did regularly, five times a day. They were devout, and they were also kidnappers and extortionists. Perhaps it had to do with spiritual teachings he had encountered earlier in his life, or perhaps it sprang from his reading of the Bible while in captivity, but Moore discovered that for him, the only way to make it through his ordeal, his veil of misery, was to practice radical forgiveness. He simply quit imagining that he was on one side of a line, the righteous side, and that his captors, were on another. To survive, to keep his humanity and his very life intact, he had to humanize his enemies, to imagine the conditions that led them toward such actions, and to treat them with the dignity and respect that no one in the world had ever afforded them. Daily, hourly, Moore learned to forgive them. That forgiveness is what got him out alive, he says.

That too is a lesson we need right now. When we are forced to wait through something that causes us discomfort or pain, it is very easy to focus upon our anger, and to get lost in our grievances. It is very easy to blame others for our discomfort, and to lash out in anger. Such anger may be justified, but it may not be productive. That's true now more than ever. It's so easy to feel angry – about something, anything, in this long period of waiting. I sure feel it. Don't you? When I think about those parents in Michigan who bought their child an automatic assault rifle for Christmas, I feel nearly stupefied with anger and outrage. But not only toward them. That anger spills over toward the lawmakers who, again and again, refuse to make assault weapons illegal. It flows, like hot lava, toward the weapons manufacturers, the CEOs and the office workers and the shareholders, who are busy making these death tools available to the public. And then it starts creeping toward all those shops and department stores that sell and distribute those tools of terror all across America. By the time I'm through, I feel nearly apoplectic with a pent up – and I would say, a justified, anger. And not only that: when I think about the anti-vaccine superstitions that have us locked in a cycle of sickness and death, or when I think about the climate denialism that's rendering the planet precarious, or when I try to fathom the lies that were disseminated, and believed, about election fraud, lies that may yet spell the death of our democracy – it all feels outrageous, and stunning, and insane. Without hyperbole, without exaggeration, we can say that a significant portion of the country is caught up in what can only be called a modern death cult, one that puts everybody, everybody, at risk. If I'm honest, anger is the least of what I feel in my unguarded moments. I have a hunch I'm not the only one in this room to feel such things.

But then I'm drawn up short, for I recall something I learned from a mentor a long time ago. Often, when we feel such anger toward others, when we wish to condemn someone, however justified we may feel, it's a sign that we're encountering some part of ourselves that we haven't fully integrated, or worked through. I don't know about you, but I think that's true of me, at least in part. If I am honest, I do recognize a part of myself in those attitudes toward the world, a part of myself that identified, as a young person, as an evangelical. And that helps me to understand, just a tiny bit, all of those folks that now seem so outrageous to me. I see myself in them, at least in a kind of prismatic way. They're insisting – perversely – upon a radical autonomy that I too once prized, at least in part, the belief that no one, not government officials,

not office bureaucrats, not scientists, not lawmakers, and certainly not those born into greater privilege, that no one had the right to infringe upon or diminish one's personal autonomy and one's personal dignity. Even scientific facts matter little when up against that central, core, value: the nomos, the law, of the self. Far from being born of ignorance or backwardness, it's actually an attitude born of a certain wing of the Enlightenment, where the autonomy of the self must be protected above all else. However deformed, however reprehensible it has become, I recognize those elements in myself. But I suspect that's also true for many Americans, nurtured as we all have been among some isolated, and fragmentary, shards of Enlightenment reason. Perhaps I need to forgive myself for once yielding to those tendencies. Perhaps that would help me to feel a little less angry, and a little more forgiving, toward those who cling to those shards of understanding now. That doesn't mean excusing the consequences of those ideologies, and it will still be necessary to hold accountable those who are using those shards to such damaging effect. Still, it may be that the only way through this moment is to begin with forgiveness. Perhaps that sort of radical forgiveness is something we could all start practicing.

After nearly three years, Michael Scott Moore was released. His ordeal didn't last forever. It was his mother, it turns out, who negotiated his release. Both during and after those 977 days, Moore learned to do what the Psalmist described: walking through the vale of misery, the valley of Baca, he used that experience for a well. As a result, he brims with an uncommon insight, wisdom, and compassion.

Advent, like Moore's long stretch of captivity, is a profoundly challenging waiting game. But someday, this time may well come to be the defining experience of our lives. Let's use it productively, trusting that this vale of misery will one day be used as a well, from which we'll draw deep powers of wisdom. The wisdom to not be tossed about by this or that emotion, but to know that we belong to God, and that it is God who holds us; the wisdom to laugh both within, and at, our predicament, and especially at ourselves; and the wisdom to forgive, recognizing a part of ourselves in even our bitterest foes; these are ways of readying the world for the arrival of the Christ child. More still, they may be ways of birthing that child into the world over and over again, taking the vale of misery, and using it for a well.