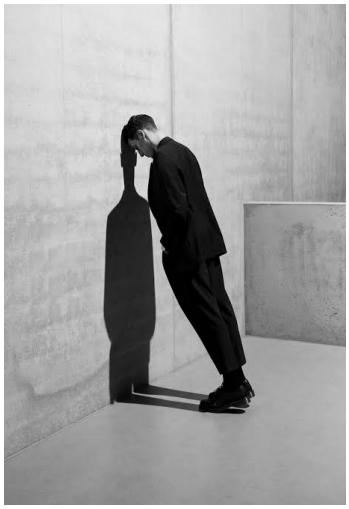
The Art of Waiting

Robert Steiner



- IGNANT studio

Scripture Readings:
Malachi 4:1-6
Mark 1:1-8

"God hides in the intervals." (Jorge Luis Borges)

Waiting

The philosopher Walter Benjamin was known for appreciating the gift that comes with waiting. He was convinced that waiting makes the heart fonder and the one we wait for more precious and beautiful. This is why he made a special effort to always arrive early at the station when fetching his great love. He wanted to make her even more beautiful by waiting with great expectancy. Not unlike the early Church which thought of itself as the bride, waiting for the coming of the bridegroom, the long awaited Messiah. Not unlike Paul's idea in his letter to the Ephesians that love has the power to present the one we love without any wrinkles. The longer we wait, the older we get, the more beautiful we make each other. So often we think of beauty as the condition for love. Meanwhile love has the power to make us more beautiful.

The Austrian journalist and novelist Joseph Roth encourages us to think of life as "a waiting room." Think for a moment of all the places that invite you into a space of waiting: At the counter of a shop, at the robot, at the telephone, in the doctor's room. We wait for spring, for a vacation, for a diagnosis, for the birth of a child, for a happy ending. Those periods can be experienced as both an imposition and a gift. It is a matter of interpretation and what we do with the unexpected, gifted time. If we think of the experience of standing in a queue the ambiguity of waiting becomes very visible. Our first response is often annoyance and agitation. But the idea of the queues originated in Britain, giving expression to an egalitarian principle: First come, first served! At least in a queue no distinction is made. For a moment we all have the same status, we are all human beings and citizens with the same rights and obligations. I am still waiting to spot one of our politicians in a queue at home affairs. Why should their time be more valuable than mine? There is a waiting that is humbling, slowing us down, making us think and transforming our preconceived ideas about status and privilege. The transformative aspect of waiting constitutes a fundamental element in our Judeo-Christian tradition.

Elijah's Chair

Malachi is the last book in the Christian version of First Testament. It ends with the announcement of Elijah's return, marking the beginning of the end, the cataclysmic day of the Lord, the end of the world as we know it. Four hundred years later the Gospel writers see this prophecy fulfilled. Elijah and Moses meet Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. And in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus even refers to John the baptized as the promised Elijah. Both appearances of the one prophet known to never have died, but taken up to the heavens with a chariot, signal the closeness of God's coming. The end of the waiting period seems to have come.

In our congregation we have a special chair dedicated to the prophet Elijah. It stands out among the other wooden chairs with its more delicate ornamentation, darker wood, and a striking red upholstery. According to Rabbinic teachings Elijah is supposed to be present at every circumcision. As "the angel of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1) he is seated on a special chair and is greeted and invited at the circumcision of a child. This tradition goes back to the times when Elijah had to flee from Jezebel who was responsible for the abolishment of circumcision in the Northern Kingdom. From then on Elijah is seen as an important witness and guardian, making sure that Israel does not break the covenant again. For us the chair is a reminder of those who helped prepare the way of the Lord and announce the coming of God. We cannot do without those voices from the wilderness, calling us to think of our own role in lowering the mountains and lifting the valleys. Such response is a form of active waiting, anticipating what is to come.

As we re-arranged our worship space a few years ago to emphasize that we are tabled people, gathered around a central table, Elijah's chair was moved to the back of the church, closer to the entrance. It then became a chair reserved for a regular visitor who lives on the streets. At times he would arrive in the middle of the service making quite a public entrance. We realized that even though he must have suffered some severe trauma, he had not been able to access sustained support for his mental health. As the congregation learned to accommodate his erratic and unpredictable behavior, a growing sense of solidarity and compassion replaced the initial response of mere pity and charity. His presence became a call into the wilderness, an invitation to recognize our own woundedness and vulnerability. But only now did I make the connection between him, Elijah and John the Baptist. His absence is noted at the moment. And the chair is waiting to be occupied again. No one would dare to occupy his seat. Waiting includes the discipline of not filling the gaps, to allow for emptiness of space and mind. No one can be simply replaced. Visible gaps dignify and sanctify.

the end of the world

When environmental scientists begin to speak like apocalyptic prophets, then it is important to remember that the bible's apocalyptic visions cannot be reduced to predictions of doom and gloom. Central to Malachi's announcements are not the catastrophes, but the fact, that God is coming to restore justice and peace. Klaus Berger speaks of God as the eye in the storm, the God who comes after the storm. Berger's overview of the visions of the end in the Second Testament present us with various perspectives that cannot simply be harmonized. Some texts about the end of the world speak of judgement, others don't. Some passages list severe catastrophes, others don't. Especially those writings that affirm Jesus's role in the creation of the world, cannot imagine the destruction of the same world as being part of God's redemptive actions. While all texts share an orientation to the future and envision God's decisive intervention, they do disagree on how this new heaven and earth will come into being. But just as the creation stories do not want to be read as scientific accounts, in the same way the apocalyptic texts do not attempt to describe the events around the final blow in a few billions of years, when either severe cold or heat will end life on this planet.

The hermeneutical challenge is to reclaim those texts from both the literalists and the existentialists. The biblical apocalypse neither lends itself to positivistic speculation nor to a purely existentialistic reading. The focus is rather on making the bold claim that history is not a closed system, an endless repetition of the same, but that at any moment reality can be broken open again and surprise us. In the same way no political power or ideology

should be allowed to have absolute authority over our lives. Our primary loyalty belongs to the God who comes to bring Shalom. And God's ultimate concern is with the rehabilitation of the victims of history. Their cries will not remain unheard and their suffering will not be silenced forever. Perpetrators and political powers will be held accountable. There will be a truth and reconciliation commission. Such reassurance inspires non-violent resistance, for God will rise and establish justice. And this is where the church needs to be found, in opposition to those who dominate and exploit others.

It is important to emphasize that apocalyptic texts do not encourage a fatalist view of the world. Disaster and judgement are not inevitable. There is no mysterious itinerary of signs and events that necessarily lead to a final destruction of the world. On the contrary, underlying the threats and warnings of an end of the world, is a constant thread of hope: If you turn towards me, I will turn towards you. God remains responsive, willing to forgive and be reconciled. The prophetic call is meant to provoke change and repentance, not paralysis and despair. If only there would be more Greta Thunbergs responding with the same commitment to our environmental crisis. Very much in line with Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom, where a child will lead us, we witness the courageous and bold leadership of young people around the world, marching and protesting, calling politicians into responsibility. The *Fridays for Future* movements around the world confront us with the kind of outrage and uprising that the apocalyptic prophets of our tradition were hoping to inspire among their own people. It is not simply a call for change, but for transformation, for being transformed by a vision of justice and peace that counters our anthropocentrism and extends Shalom to the whole of creation.

a voice in the wilderness

John the Baptist's Advent call into the wilderness echoes Malachi's apocalyptic warnings. Old prophetic yearnings, dormant for centuries, are re-activated. The end is near, according to John. But it is not too late to turn around and repent. What are we waiting for? The images he uses to evoke a response are fear infusing. But fear cannot sustain ongoing change. There needs to be more than that, a deeper thirst and hunger - not only for socio-political changes, but for a change of heart. Deserts are places that have the power to reveal our inner poverty and emptiness. They are able to reveal a thirst that cannot be quenched by the offerings of our consumer culture, which promises fullness, but ultimately leaves us empty. John prepared the way by helping his people to reconnect with their deep inner yearnings for life: What is it that wants to live within me? What is the calling within me, almost forgotten, lingering, and waiting to be embraced and to be affirmed? Baptism signals a dying to the old and a rising to something new. The voice from heaven, witnessed at Jesus's baptism, makes a bold proclamation: "You are my beloved child, in whom I have great delight." We are clearly not just the product of our parents, of our context, or of people's expectations. Our baptism gives expression to a unique freedom: Our ultimate loyalty belongs to God, the source of our life. It is a freedom rooted in a love that knows no conditions and no end. Our worth and dignity is not dependent on our performance and progress. And faith communities become the guardians of such dignity and freedom.

The theologian and psychotherapist Eugen Drewermann is right to point out, that John's call to repentance should not be reduced to a confrontation with our sins and transgressions. It must include the possibility of having lost sight of one's own calling. To neglect one's yearning and dreams is another form of unfaithfulness and cannot be captured in moral categories. The Spirit's promise is to gift the young with dreams and the old with visions. We should take note that Malachi ends with the promise that Elijah's return will turn "the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to the parents." It is a reconciliation across the generations that will involve a more empathetic listening from both sides. The environmental crisis revealed a growing divide not only between the poor and rich, but also between the younger and older generation. To prepare the way is to begin a more honest and authentic conversation about failures, disappointments and shortcomings that will have a major impact on the future of this planet. When Greta Thunberg spoke at the United Nations in front of all the world leaders, she did not mince her words: "Dare you do this to us!" She was enraged and filled with indignation. There was a young girl, willing to challenge the complacency of those in power and ready to provoke an intergenerational encounter. In the light of Malachi's vision, an uncanny and

unnerving scene. We need to wait and see if her challenge will be accepted and translated into a renewed commitment to bring down CO2 emissions.

what is hidden will be revealed

The Jewish expectation is that in the end will be revealed what is already present now but still hidden. This is why we pray in the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come on earth as it is [already] in heaven." At any moment, glimpses of what is to come, can be revealed in the here and now. Jesus's parables manage to sustain the tension between the *not yet* and the *already now*. To wait is to anticipate the promised newness. To wait is to orientate one's life towards God's hidden rule. Such compliance and faithfulness brings the future into the presence. And what we have tasted, we thirst for with greater intensity and passion. The principle is not new. Already the prophets believed that Israel's turning towards God would prompt a turning of God towards Israel. Advent signals a double movement: We rise and move towards the God who comes to us. The Pharisees, to whom Jesus was very close theologically, believed that if the whole of Israel would manage to sanctify itself one day, then the Messiah would come. It inspires a waiting which is far from passive. There is a dynamic spatial and temporal dimension to God's coming. What is hidden, can be revealed now. What is expected in the future, can be brought closer now. And, as the Rabbis maintained, there is always an element of surprise: "There are three things that come unexpectedly - a robber, a scorpion and the Messiah."

But what if the Messiah is already among us, present but not yet revealed? The writer Francis Dorff tells an intriguing story about the Messiah's hidden presence. In a nutshell (my own translation and version): We are taken into a forest hut, to which a Rabbi comes regularly to pray and fast. One evening he sees the abbot of a nearby monastery approaching. The Rabbi welcomed him with open arms, as if he expected him. They hugged each other like brothers, who had finally found each other again. As they sat down the abbot told the Rabbi about how deserted the monastery had become. Many of the young monks had left and few visitors would come to be strengthened by prayer. And those remaining would sing their daily praises with heavy hearts. He did not know what to do. The Rabbi listened attentively. They sat at a table in the middle of the room. The Holy Scriptures lay in front of them, opened. Suddenly the Rabbi began to cry. The abbot covered his face with his hands and also began to cry. They sat there like children who were lost. Their sobbing filled the room. At some stage the Rabbi began to counsel the abbot: "You serve our God with a heavy heart. I will give you a word of advice. But you are to repeat it only once. And no one else is to repeat it every again." The Rabbi looked at the abbot for a long time, his eyes wide open and then whispered: "They Messiah is among you." There was silence for a moment. Then the Rabbi instructed the abbot to go. He left without any further exchange of words or glances. The next morning the abbot called his brothers together. He shared about his encounter with the Rabbi and that he had received a message, which should not ever be repeated: "The Rabbi told me, that one of us is the Messiah." The brothers were shocked at those words and wondered about its meaning: "Is it brother John? Or brother Matthew? Am I ... the Messiah?" But despite the sudden confusion, no one would repeat the message. With time the monks would look at each other with a whole new sense of reverence. The atmosphere changed. It was hard to describe, but clearly felt by those who visited the monastery. There was a new warmth and sincerity in the way the people engaged with each other. They lived together as people who had finally found something. And when they turned to the Holy Scriptures they did so as people, who were always expecting something. Those who came to pray and fast were touched and transformed by their experience of this community. It was a new beginning, an unexpected spring. Visitors came from near and far to be strengthened by the brothers's prayer life. Young people began to join the community again. But the message, the message was never repeated again.

Hiding in the intervals

God of the intervals,
the queues and the waiting rooms.

There are those who make me wait,
to know their power.
And there are those who wait on me,
to receive their care.

May I be one of those,
who wait for you
and wait on you.

For the sake of those
who no longer wait
and have given up waiting.

And may you become
more beautiful,
more visible,
more tangible,
the longer I wait.

References:

Klaus Berger, *Wie kommt das Ende der Welt?*
Eugen Drewermann, *Der offene Himmel: Meditationen zu Advent und Weihnachten*.
Jewish Encyclopedia, "Elijah's Chair", Salomon Schechter, M. Grunwald.
Ellinor Krogmann, "Gedehnte Zeit", SWR2 Tandem (5th August 2019).