

## IT'S STILL CLASSIFIED

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The words “how long” are quite variable. Sometimes they just mark the passage of ordinary time. How long until my car is done? How long do I have to complete this test? How long until school’s out for summer? But as the words “how long” mark off ordinary time, they can also announce the presence of sacred time. How long until this baby is born? How long until this person is baptized? How long does my loved one have to live? And then there are those instances when the words “how long” serve to express a sense of urgency and unrest.

How long until a vaccine is approved and widely distributed? How long will current strictures on indoor gatherings last? How long will each day find two thousand or more Americans dying thanks to a global pandemic? How long will our nation remain divided and politically hamstrung? How long will political spin and manipulation talk louder than science and common sense? It’s where we are at present. Expressing a sense of urgency and unrest, we’re quite often asking, thinking, and feeling, “How long?”

In this regard, we’re perhaps ready to do Advent more than we usually are. How long, as in the sense we’ve been asking it lately, is one of this season’s defining questions. Far from inquiring after how many days it will be until we hear of Jesus’ birth, Advent inquires about how long it will be until God sets things in order once and for all. Today our two Old Testament readings travel in this direction. In our reading from Isaiah, God is urged to tear open the heavens and set things straight immediately. Being a second-class player in the arena of political affairs, Israel is sick and tired of setbacks in its efforts to become a healthy and viable nation. How long will the shame and disgrace go on Israel wants to know. And then, in our psalm Israel repeatedly cries out to God, “Restore us! Let your light shine upon us! Save us!” This too is the language of how long! How long, O God, will you force us to endure less than what you have promised and less than you evidently desire for us? This is the stuff of Advent. How long will it be before Christ comes again with a new heaven and a new earth in tow? How long will people of faith like you and me have to hunger and thirst after righteousness in a world where it’s often in short supply?

Thankfully, when we ask, feel, and think such questions, we don’t need to do so quietly. In our faith at least, it’s okay to get after God a bit and do our best to kick things into gear. If a life of faith was to be a life of stoic and silent resignation, God’s word wouldn’t include passages like the ones we’ve heard and read today thanks to the prophet Isaiah and the author of Psalm 80. What God desires from us isn’t a robotic relationship devoid of passion and emotion. What God wants is a relationship that includes all of us. To use myself as an example, I’m not just my faith. I’m also my fears. I’m not just my belief. I’m also my doubts. I’m not just my happiness and contentment. I’m also my pain and my restlessness. Like a good spouse or a lifelong friend, God wants all of this from me and God wants all of it from you too.

I mean let’s not forget that Jesus did teach us to pray, “Hallowed by thy name! Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done not just up in heaven, but also down here on earth!” These are the prayers of the restless. These are the prayers of those who still hunger and thirst for more. These are the prayers of those who in their own way say, “God, get after it! Get down to business! Tear open the heavens and come down to set things straight!” And so, when this is where we find ourselves, as we likely do now, let’s not hesitate to ask, feel, and think, “How long?” Both Scripture and the gift of prayer tell us it’s healthy and natural.

But as we heed and honor the encouragement to lay it all out there, holding nothing whatsoever back from God, let’s also recognize that Scripture and prayer are going to tell us

something else too. They're going to say that when it comes to our relationship with God there's a lot which still remains classified; a lot we're going to have to wait to learn at another time. To quote our reading from Mark, there are going to be times when only God the Father knows; times when the gap between heaven and earth shall remain intact longer than we would like. It's part of what we recognize when we pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." God's in charge and we're not. God's up there and we're down here. It's for similar reasons that we also conclude The Lord's Prayer with the words "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever ever." When it comes to many of the things we want when we ask, feel, and think, "How long," God holds all the cards and there shall be no changing this. Until Christ comes again, there shall be much in our relationship with God which remains classified.

But as there's that which remains classified, there's also that which has been declassified or soon will be. Our mission as the Church is one example of this. Here at Mount Calvary, we summarize that mission by saying we're around to invite every generation on a shared journey to Christian growth. This is entirely consistent with Scripture and the hopes and dreams for the future that were prevalent when we began our time together going on five years ago. Whether we or our neighbors are healthy or ill, we're around to invite people of every age and origin into the Good News of Jesus Christ. As political parties and politicians connive and scramble to reserve all the power for themselves, we share the journey and all that it requires. And whether we're new or old to congregation, we keep at it out of the recognition that we're all always in need of Christian growth. No matter whatever else may remain classified, this shall remain declassified. It's always going to be on the table and out in the open for us to pursue. And, and, and, our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians assures us we can get it done; promising us that thanks to God we have every spiritual gift that both today and tomorrow shall require. And this applies not just to the congregation as a whole, but also to every one of us individually.

You see, when St. Paul wrote to those at Corinth long ago, he was addressing people who thought church was about the few rather than the many. At least some of the Corinthians thought that these people were more important than those people; that these spiritual gifts were more to be desired than those spiritual gifts. It's why straight out of the gate, as we've seen and heard today, St. Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians by telling them they're well-stocked and not short on inventory; having everything they need to endure and succeed until the day of Jesus Christ. Until the day of Jesus Christ, this collection of people will do. Until the day of Jesus Christ, the present collection of spiritual gifts will get the job done. To each has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Now it's just time to live and function like this were really and truly true; time for each member and participant to stay in their own shoes and skin so that they might be the unique and vital child God has forever adopted through baptism and blessed with the ongoing tutelage of the Holy Spirit. And so, as we ask, think, and feel, "How long," may we also ask, think, and feel, "What now?" On some occasions the answer will be immediate. On other occasions it will take time to develop. But in ways various and consistent, the answer will merge and always involve two things. It will involve us inviting every generation on a shared journey to Christian growth and it will involve each of us contributing to that mission not as somebody else, but as ourselves; the collection of unique and vital children God has forever adopted through baptism and blessed with the ongoing tutelage of the Holy Spirit. Amen!