

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. (2 Peter 3:8-14)

Why Does God Wait so Long?

Last Friday, NASA launched the first Orion space craft. It was an unmanned flight, but the new system is designed to eventually carry astronauts to Mars. My only question is: why did they wait so long? I was in kindergarten when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. My life's ambition as a child was to be an astronaut. But then we went and spent decades on space shuttles going into low earth orbit. Finally, we're going to do some real space exploration again. But they won't get to Mars now until sometime in the 2030's. I'm going turn seventy during that decade and I don't think they're going to let me go along. Why did they wait so long?

Although I do still want to be an astronaut when I grow up, I don't really want to talk to you about space exploration this morning. But my question for NASA echoes a question that serves as the basis for the word of God that we have before us this morning. Why does God wait so long? The Apostle Peter answers that question for us today because Jesus' second coming is the whole reason why he came the first time. There would be no point to him dying and rising and ascending into heaven if he weren't going to return to judge the world and take us home. In one sense, the kingdom of God did come when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It does come in another sense every time someone comes to faith. But it really and truly comes in all its glory and fullness only when Jesus comes again. The church has been waiting for 2000 years for him to come. **Why does God wait so long?**

I.

Because he's being patient with us. That's the answer that Peter gives. God knew when Jesus ascended into heaven that it would be at least 2000 years before Jesus came back. He has a schedule that he's following and he says that Jesus is coming quickly. But he knew that 2000 years would seem like a really long time to us. In the verses right before our reading, Peter says that in the last days scoffers would ask, **"Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."** Of course, those scoffers are out there today. I just read a book about Jerusalem. The author tried really hard to be sensitive to all the different religions that treasure that city. Yet, I couldn't help feeling like he was sneering a little bit every time he talked about all the different sects that have come to Jerusalem to wait for Jesus' second coming. The writer was not a Christian, so he doesn't believe that Jesus is really coming. To many unbelievers, it seems like an easy target to make fun of because he's been gone for so long.

But God reckons time differently than we do. To God a thousand years is like a day and a day is like a thousand years. What does that mean? Is it like when my dad talks about how quickly time goes by? When he looks back at when I was a child, it seems like time has flown by. He used to joke that he thought the earth was spinning faster now than it did when he was a kid. Are we talking about something like that? Probably not. Many teachers in the church have argued that this means that God experiences everything in one eternal "now." In other words, God stands outside of time, the way we stand outside of an aquarium, God can walk around and focus on this corner or that corner, but he can also stand back and see it all. Is that what God is like? Maybe. I personally find that to be a somewhat philosophical approach, but maybe it's true.

What we can say is that to God, who has no beginning and no ending, who was always there before time began and who will always be here after this world is done, to him, time just isn't a big deal. Two or three

thousand years in a lifetime that will go on for uncounted billions is nothing. And maybe he really does stand outside of time looking in. So even though he knows it's hard for us to see and understand, from his perspective, Christ is coming quickly. Like so many things that God tells us, it takes faith to see it that way. What we see is the world continuing on the way it always has and it does not feel like God is moving quickly. But he is. He calls us to trust him when he says that he is.

But Peter does tell us why it's taking so long, from our perspective. He says: **"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."** I've been called lots of things in my life, but "patient" was never one of them. God is absolutely patient. He's not dragging his feet the way I do when I have to do something unpleasant. I can always find something else to do instead. But God isn't like that. He has no sinful weakness to make him hesitate or procrastinate. God is waiting for the exact right moment for Jesus to return.

What's he waiting for? To bring in the maximum number of believers. God wants every sinner on this earth to come to repentance. In this passage, repentance means more than just being sorry about your sins. It means trusting in Jesus to take those sins away. In that sense, it's really the same as saying "faith." You and I, by the grace of God, have that faith. But God isn't done yet. He knows that many people will never come to repentance. In fact, he knows exactly who those people are and he knows who he has chosen to give the gift of eternal life. He is patiently waiting until the very last believer comes in. Christ will not return even a moment before that time comes. God waited for you and me and for our children and for some of you, for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He will continue to wait.

But not forever. God has a plan. Just like Jesus came to Bethlehem at the exact right moment to fulfill his mission of living in our place and dying for our sins and raising again to give us eternal life, so Jesus will return at the exact moment God has selected to wipe away this world of sin and death and replace it with the new heavens and the new earth: the home of righteousness. Trust in his plan and his promise.

II.

Waiting is tough. Imagine how hard it was for those scientists who launched that Orion rocket. They've been working on it for a long time. It was supposed to launch on Thursday but weather caused them to cancel the launch and try again on Friday. I bet for those guys, the rest of Thursday was one of the longest days of their lives. It would be hard to engage in something to keep your mind off the waiting. Of course, there was no guarantee that it would go on Friday either. But they at least had a date. With us, it's different. Peter follows Jesus in saying the he will return like a thief in the night, at a time when people don't expect him. That's part of what makes our waiting so hard. It just magnifies how long it's been and increases our questioning. **Why does God wait so long?**

Because he's giving us a chance to live for him. God wants fruits of faith and he wants them here. Peter asks the question: **"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?"** What destruction does he mean? Twice he says that the world as we know it will be destroyed by fire. He says even the heavens – probably meaning the sky here – will disappear. Now, there's a lot of debate about what he says. Is he saying that the world will be wiped out and God will create a whole new world or is he saying that God is going to burn this one down to its foundations and rebuild on that? I tend to follow the second choice. But it doesn't matter which way you go on it – the world as we know it will be gone. There will be nothing left of the things that we worked all our lives for. That house that you spent decades paying for and improving, that car that you love so much, all those family heirlooms that have been handed down from generation to generation, even your one more precious possession of this life – it will all be gone forever.

So how should we live while we're here? Peter says, **"You ought to live holy and godly lives."** It's such a simple statement, but it's such an impossible standard. Think what it would mean to be truly holy and godly. It wouldn't be enough that we would always say and do the things God tells us to. We'd have to do them with joy and gladness that God lets us be a part of it. Every time we have to crawl out of bed on Sunday morning when we're rather sleep in, we would need to rejoice about that. Every time we get to testify about Christ to people who don't want to hear it and who are going to make us pay for it, we'd have to be happy to suffer for Jesus' sake. Every time we write a check to church or stop what we're doing to explain God's Word with our children or make a sacrifice for the good of someone else, we'd need to be glad that God gave us the opportunity to do that and be generous with our time and our gift. In short, to be truly holy and godly, we would need to have our minds and our hearts focused on Christ. Not on the sinful pleasures of this life. Not on

the things that make us angry or prideful. Not on the things that distract us from his word. 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we would need to be completely dedicated to Christ.

We just can't live like that here on this earth. That's why it's passing away. This world is full of sin and that sin infects our hearts and minds, too. We cannot measure up to what God calls us to. But Jesus did. He was holy and godly every day of his life from the moment that he was first conceived in Mary's womb, through all the years that he grew up in Nazareth until he bowed his head and gave up his spirit on the cross, in word and action, in thought and feeling, Jesus was one hundred percent dedicated to God. He lived that holy and godly life in our place. He did it so that God could count us as living that life. Then he died and paid for all the times and all the ways that our heart and mind were somewhere else when our words and actions looked Christian. He died and paid for all the times and all the ways our words and actions denied him. He paid for all our sin and then he rose and declared that we are forgiven and free forever.

Now, for this brief moment between his first and second comings, he gives us the chance to live for him. He's going to burn this world down because it is thoroughly contaminated by sin. He's going to destroy it because he didn't come here just to save our souls so that we can float around in heaven. He came here to save our hearts and our minds and our bodies, too. He came to end sin's dominion over the world he made and to give us a perfect world in which we can live a perfect life with him. When he returns, he's going to raise the dead and purify the living. He's going to send the unbelievers to hell and give to us, his children, the new heavens and the new earth, the home of righteousness. And life will be perfect in that new home forever.

That's what really matters even while we live this life. That's what he calls us to focus on. You are going to be holy and godly forever. Be holy and godly now. No, you can't be perfect here. But you can strive, every day, by the grace of God and with his power to live for him. You can give thanks to him every night for the joys and the successes, for the faith that strives. And you can ask his forgiveness for the failures and take that forgiveness as power to start over again tomorrow and strive to do even better.

Before the Apollo astronauts left to go to the moon, my mom told me about it. I remember being afraid that Jesus would come back while they were gone and they'd come home and the world wouldn't be here. It's easy for us to worry about the wrong things while we wait. I don't know when Jesus is coming back. But I know why God is waiting. He's waiting for every last believer to come in. And he's waiting while we exercise our faith here and live for him. Trust in his plan to come for you and live for him here because you know you are going to live with him there. Amen.