

When Church Stops Working Book Study, Presbytery of Niagara
Chapter 5: Waiting Brings Life, Not a Slow Death

Summary:

- We admire the smoothness of current technologies, recalling the glitches of early models
- Because of being accustomed to this smoothness, younger generations have little resilience towards conflict or tension
- We want church to run smoothly too.
- Church is very glitchy
- Waiting means we have to live with that – the glitches, tension, uncertainty, and vulnerability
- Tension, even crisis, is deep in the DNA of the church
- They are signs of life!
- Real communities, made up of real people living real lives, are always in tension.
- To want it otherwise is to want something fake
- The desire for the church to be less fragile (due to decline) should not be at the expense of crisis
- We need crisis
- The church will never be called to an easy-street, crisis-free life
- Decline is not the crisis
- The real crisis is encountering a living God who is God.
- The only way to live in this crisis is to wait.
- Otherwise, we deny that we are in need of God's action to save us
- Instead, we take action to save ourselves.
- Our question ought to be, "How can we help our people encounter the living God in a secular age that blinds them to anything beyond the here and now?"
- Waiting inside this crisis of waiting for God's action is what sustains the church
- The church of Denmark in the 19th century seemed successful to the point of becoming very comfortable.
- Søren Kierkegaard said that no crisis means no God.
- A church beyond crisis implies a church of disobedience.
- The problem with a church that wants a smooth life beyond crisis that it wants to control God.
- God, however, is wild and uncontrollable
- We only know God because God chooses to reveal Godself to us.
- We don't have enough brain to comprehend God – that is a crisis.
- The way forward is to lean into the crisis
- Because we are creatures bound to the world, we can know the true God only as God has made Godself known in and for the world.
- God only reveals Godself through ordinary people and through the crucified Jesus.
- God comes to us in very backward ways.
- This God-who-cannot-be-known is known as the God who comes to save and love us.
- We must wait for this God to reveal Godself.
- The church has no life other than waiting for and witnessing to the God who reveals Godself in the world in the backward ways of love.
- Eternity can enter time, but not the other way around.

- The church, bound in time, made up of time-bound people in tension and discords, nevertheless is part of the life of the eternal God
- We are waiting in time for the eternal God to speak to us, to direct us, to lead us out in service to the world.
- Our crisis is continual because God is God.

Reminder that the definition of crisis is: *“An unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending.”* (from Meriam Webster)

Discussion:

- “I found this chapter to be pivotal - It changed the way I think about church. Up until now, the authors were laying the groundwork. Now they point out that the crisis is actually God. It clarified that the waiting is not just a sitting back, but a leaning in to meet God.”
- Part of the crisis is the secular age - God has been squeezed out. Only the natural world is “real” and the supernatural world doesn’t exist. The fact that we believe that God exists and does so in this supernatural way
- It’s contrary to how a lot of people think.
- We want to control everything - part of the secular mindset.
- We can ask Siri or Alexa or Google about anything and we’ve become accustomed to that way of thinking.
- We have this picture that we know Jesus as our friend. The book says, “You only know what God reveals; and God only reveals a little bit.” I was very Jesus-centric in my views and now they’ve really blown it up for me.

Podcast: the church is in a difficult time period, but not the most difficult that it has been in.

Questions:

Tell of a time when you or someone you know had an encounter with God. Describe the emotions that were at play.

- It was difficult to express these stories ...
- Story of a man going into surgery who was worried. We had a good conversation and it brought him peace. He passed away. It was amazing to be a part of God’s healing of someone’s anxiety.
- Recently visited some friends; she was fighting breast cancer. We were having a really good time together. “Are you getting tired of people asking how you are all the time?” Yes. “Has anyone ever told you how you can know Jesus personally?” No. [explained] “I’ll think about it.” About 10 days later she died. I’m thankful that we had that conversation.
- An older relative said, “take me, Jesus” on his deathbed.
- When winter driving, she found herself on a patch of black ice. She prayed, “God, help me!” and believed that God was with her. That location is a reminder to her of God’s presence.
- When a desire to go overseas aligned with another person being there, it was easier to go. It felt like God’s hand was in that.

1. Without crisis the church would be dead. Crisis is what keeps us alive. How does that jive with our desire to have things go smoothly?

- Churches are a lot like families, loving each other but the presence of conflict as well.
 - When leading a church, it seemed to always be in crisis. There was definitely a desire for some smooth patches.
 - I was a people pleaser to keep things smooth
 - Sometimes, crises can be overwhelming and it's hard to see where God is in the mess.
 - In a church in conflict, after a sermon on forgiveness, a nine-year-old started the conversation and helped the adults to forgive.
 - Crisis makes you get more creative. You want to make things run smoother. Sometimes people work better in crisis. When you're in crisis, you are more connected to God because you pray for guidance. The more you are connected to God the more you are creative and can try to understand what the crisis is all about and how we can come out stronger.
 - In Bible Study: "Woe to those who have their wealth and are admired..." When you are in those situations you think everything is great, you don't need God. Luke was saying you grow complacent when you don't have crisis and this will be your downfall. I would like to not have crisis but would like a relationship with God.
 - Perhaps we have experiences that we're not totally aware of and that brought to my mind what St Paul said to the Philosophers - "I want to talk to you about the God in whom we all live and move and have our being." Whether we're aware of it or not, it is the reality that surrounds us.
 - As you move towards God, you're going to get pushback. Challenging Satan.
2. The authors claim that "Our crisis is *continual* because God is God." How can you live into that reality without anxiety? It seems like jumping out of the pot into the fire...
- There's less anxiety if you live in the present without worrying about the what-if's.
 - Trust that God will show up eventually, often in unexpected ways
 - The church is not the star of its story - God is.
 - Philippians 4:6-7: don't be anxious about anything.
 - In the state of being present - resonating with what is - the life around us.
 - Remember the stories of encounters with God.
 - Understanding crisis as normal; welcoming it as part of the journey
 - The crisis of God requires us to be present, resonating in relationships, prepared to receive.
3. How can we help our people encounter the living God in a secular age that blinds them to anything beyond the here and now?
- We need wisdom.
 - It's hard
 - People don't go to church
 - We have to wait patiently, without anxiety
 - Be myself; be real; as opposed to being fake or perfect
 - "I can't live without God"
 - Because God is God, we must wait.
 - In the first chapters of the book, we were enjoined to become aware and present to the here and now. Maybe that's a good place to start.
 - Give voice to the fact that your life isn't perfect.
 - Paradigms - helping people to see outside of the boxes in which they live (a box without God)

- Letting people know you're a Christian, without being embarrassed
- Going to church on Sunday over other priorities.
- If people are living a secular life they might wonder about what makes us different. Not pushing it on people but being open to saying, "That's what I do."
- There's something that I have sometimes done: if you're out in a meeting outside of the church and somebody says or does something, I will say, "Thank you for saying/doing the Christian thing." It opens an interesting dialogue most of the time.
- We have a prayer circle. "Would you like me to share this with our prayer circle?" People never say no. One person who was included in the prayer circle, then got a religious card from a family member. They have since found a church. It's in small ways - you connect and plant a seed and you don't know what the result will be. They feel a connection. Not converting people, but planting seeds.
- Not all seeds will grow, but some will. You have to keep planting seeds.