

“Waiting on the Key”
Revelation 3:7-13

With news the FDA has approved a coronavirus vaccine, I suspect some of you are beginning to wonder when it might be an option for you. A few days ago, I read an article that offers a hint. Using a tool developed by the Surgo Foundation and Ariadne Labs it gives the reader a way for approximating when you could receive the inoculation. Drawing on current recommendations for distribution protocols it asks for your age, county of residence, if you work in a profession identified as among the first to receive the vaccine and if you have a Covid-related health risk. After answering those four questions, you immediately get a glimpse of your place in line. I’ll add the link in the online manuscript of this sermon to be posted soon if you’d like to explore the tool yourself. (Thompson, Stuart A. “Find Your Place in the Vaccine Line,” <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/03/opinion/covid-19-vaccine-timeline.html>)

When I completed the survey here is what I learned. “Based on your risk profile,” it said, “we believe you’re in line behind 268.7 million people across the United States. When it comes to Pennsylvania, we think you’re behind 10.6 million others who are at a higher risk in your state. And in Bucks County, you’re behind 489,800 others.” It then offered a helpful graphic. “If the line in Pennsylvania was represented by 100 people,” it went on “this is where you’d be standing.” With number 1 being the first person to receive the vaccine, it turns out I come in at number 92. Clearly, I will be using my mask for a while yet!

We are in a season that is all about waiting and not just for a vaccine we hope will end the COVID-19 threat. Rather, Advent is that time when we prepare our heart and spirit to celebrate again the birth of Jesus. On that front, such waiting has a clearly defined end as we are now only twelve days away from Christmas morning. Yet Advent is also a season when we wait for the return of Christ; an event that has not yet happened as best we can tell and will likely still be in front of us even after the presents are unwrapped and decorations stored away.

As we wait during Advent 2020, we are focusing on different titles for Jesus found in the seasonal hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” The first week we pondered the descriptor “Wisdom from On High,” recognizing the ways our world needs such insight still. Last Sunday, we reflected on the name “Root of Jesse” recalling God’s promise of an eternal king from that ancestral line of 2000 years ago. Today, we hear of another title for Jesus that draws from the same family tree: “O come, thou Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high and close the path to misery.” While our first inclination on this day may be to hear “misery” as speaking only to the pandemic of our era, its message is broader.

The Biblical origin for that title, “Key of David,” is likely the Scripture reading before us this morning. “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia,” we read “These are the words of the holy one, the true one who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.” That phrase, “Key of David,” is found in only one other place in Scripture, the 22nd chapter of the Old Testament book Isaiah. I studied that passage and considered using it for this sermon, too, but ultimately concluded it didn’t tell much about the name’s significance. Instead, the greatest insight comes from our text as Jesus says to the people of Philadelphia, “I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.”

That first century church was one of only two congregations in Revelation whose letter did not include any words of warning or correction. Apparently, they were a small church or at least one without much influence. “I know that you have but little power,” Jesus says ‘and yet you have kept my word.’ There is some undefined struggle going on with the local synagogue

that Jesus promises will end. "If you conquer," he says, "I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God [and] I will write on you the name of my God." With those words of reassurance, he concludes, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Woven throughout Jesus' message is the image of a door, something we use frequently in everyday speech, too. As we can describe persons who are always accessible as having an "open door policy" and when conversations are sensitive, how they need to occur "behind closed doors." When a dream doesn't materialize, we can speak of "one door closing" while hoping for the time when "another door opens." When we complete a hard chapter of life, we might speak of "shutting the door" on it or even say "don't let the door hit you on your way out." I wouldn't be surprised if both of those last phrases come to mind once the year 2020 finally ends!

In sum, we speak of doors as more than only a point of entry, too, and Jesus is doing the same thing when he tells the church in Philadelphia that he is the only one who can open or shut that door. Yet as the one "who has the key of David," that is the one entrusted with unique responsibility, Jesus urged those believers of long ago and urges us on this day to "hold fast to what you have." In other words, to remain faithful as we wait.

I saw a recent newspaper article that made the same point. It was written by Michael Gerson, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush. Gerson named by *Time* magazine a few years ago as among the most significant evangelicals in our country yet he begins this article by strongly criticizing the continued suspicion voiced by prominent evangelical leaders about the trustworthiness of the recent Presidential election. Hopefully, such conspiracy talk begins to fade after tomorrow when the Electoral College votes, though I suspect it will live on.

Gerson is concerned for what that continued litany of suspicion does to those outside the church who are watching one legal ruling after another find the claims to be false as he continues: "If Christianity were judged entirely by the quality of Christians, it would be a tough sell--and I include myself in the judgment. Most of us are a jumble of resentments and fears. Most of us can be proud, cruel, foolish and self-deluding.

"The best response," he continues "is found in Advent. The most reassuring message of the season is that the existence of hope does not depend on us. It does not rely on our virtue or wisdom. It is a delivery from elsewhere...Dietrich Bonhoeffer [the Lutheran pastor who spoke against the evil of Nazism and died in a concentration camp], compared Advent to a prison cell 'in which one waits and hopes and does various unessential things...but is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside.'" (Gerson, Michael, "Prominent evangelicals are directing Trump's sinking ship. That feed doubts about religion." www.washingtonpost.com, 12/8/20)

Such is the case for you and me as we wait for whatever door we most need opened. As thankfully, our wait can have an entirely different quality because we are waiting for the Key of David, the one who has gone before us, the one who is with us, the one who one day will return.