

Present Wisdom
Proper 28C, Luke 21.5-19
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The Rev. Scott Walters

One cold December day in London, a man named William Barrett stepped to a lectern at a conference and said, "Brace yourself for five piping-hot minutes of inertia." Then he began a recitation of each of the 415 colors in a paint swatch collection: "damson dream, dauphin, dayroom yellow, dead salmon..." Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

The title of Mr. Barrett's talk was "Like Listening to Paint Dry." And if you think this sounds like a boring talk at what must have been a very boring conference, well, you're absolutely right. Because William Barrett was one of 20 speakers at the first annual Boring Conference. Not the first conference ever to be boring, but the first conference that actually titled itself "A Boring Conference." For seven hours a string of dreary experts—by which I mean experts in dreariness—held forth on topics like "The Intangible Beauty of Car Park Roofs" and "Personal Reflections on the English Breakfast" and "My Relationship with Bus Routes."

It was all James Ward's idea. After hearing that something called "The Interesting Conference" had been cancelled, he snidely fired off a tweet that someone should organize a "Boring Conference." The response was so energetic—boredom energizes some people, you see—he decided to do just that. All 50 tickets were gone in seven minutes. And before long James Ward himself was kicking off the day's events with a discussion of his necktie collection. It was accompanied by PowerPoint slides, just in case the topic wasn't intrinsically deadly enough.

It is telling that we live in a time when boredom must be planned for and sought out. It's true, there were a couple of years there during the pandemic when boredom may have come a little easier for us. But busyness seems to have made a full recovery, I'm afraid.

Interestingly, concern about the scarceness of boredom isn't new. Almost a century ago a German architect named Siegfried Kracauer worried about the "state of permanent receptivity" that, get this, radio listening might produce. His remedy? Extraordinary, radical boredom. He recommended, "On a sunny afternoon when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about the train station or, better yet, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa." Of course, Mr. Kracauer was writing long before Twitter and Instagram and the like. Nowadays, with a smartphone in hand, a couch in a darkened room might be one of the least protected places from the "assault by interestingness" that one magazine writer says we suffer.

Now a preacher holding forth on the virtues of boredom is a little like Julia Child recommending butter. Boredom is kind of our stock in trade. But the reason I bring up the subject today is because I think what the champions of boredom are really after is a change in the kind of attention we pay. So was Jesus. So was Isaiah. The distracted, it seems, will always be among us.

So, let's set aside the good advice of homiletics professors everywhere and consider two of our readings for this morning at once. Let's see if their similarities and differences might be instructive as we try to pay attention to the particulars of our lives and look for the presence of God within them, possibly discovering the way of wisdom as we do.

Isaiah's prophecy is spoken to a people who have just had a very hard time. Jesus's is to a people who are about to have one. In Isaiah 65, Israel had recently returned from exile in Babylon, a

hard time that lasted about 50 years, beginning with the siege of Jerusalem in 587bce. People were rounded up and carried away from their homeland, and the city was razed to the ground. When they returned years later they were free, but there was almost nothing left of their previous life. The city had been plundered and Solomon's Temple had been destroyed.

But God, the prophet promised, was about to create a new heavens and a new earth, not out of the watery chaos of Genesis 1, but out of the nothingness that Jerusalem had become during Israel's captivity. Isaiah's prophetic calling was to change the kind of attention Israel was paying to their bleak surroundings. God was going to do a new thing, something that didn't just follow logically and predictably from their painful history. Joy, delight, long life, good labor, and peace were coming. Train your attention carefully, says Isaiah, not on the tragic past or the bleak landscape, but on this empty place that God is about to fill up with life once again.

Centuries later, in what's called the "Little Apocalypse" of Luke 21, history is about to repeat itself in a very unsettling way. The temple, the one Israel rebuilt in response to Isaiah's promise of God's new creation, that very temple was going to be destroyed again. "The days will come," Jesus says, "when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." In other words, things are about to fall apart. So, train your attention carefully, he says. Yes, there will be signs and distractions, wars and famines and earthquakes that will seem to point toward an apocalypse you think you'll be able to understand and anticipate. But you won't. There will be plagues and persecutions and betrayals and imprisonments. But, Jesus says, don't plan your defense in advance. You will be given the words and the wisdom you will need. To endure what's coming will take not clever planning, but clear-eyed attention to this moment, difficult as that may be. Train your attention carefully on the here and now. Whether a temple is about to be built, or about to fall down, the present is where the wisdom God provides is to be found.

Christian Wiman once wrote, "If Christianity is going to mean anything at all for us now, then the humanity of God cannot be a half measure. [God] can't float over the chaos of pain and particles in which we're mired."

Well, both Isaiah and Jesus insisted that God really was present in the "chaos of pain and particles" of Israel in their new life after the exile, and of the first Christians as they watched the Romans tear down the temple. Both prophets urged people to pay attention to the place where they stood and the moment that was unfolding, because if God is with us at all in any meaningful way it is not as some abstract principle or distant force, but in the life we are actually living. In crumbling temples and audacious building projects. In lush vineyards and lousy crop returns, in typhoons and childbirth, in love, and war, and peace. That—whichever 'that' happens to be yours right now—is where God is. And that—whichever 'that' happens to be yours—is the moment on which God needs you to train your attention.

So, what is your "right now" and how might God be present to it or in it? Or, put another way, what distracts you from being present to the moment at hand? These questions aren't just for people about to build a temple or people about to lose one. They're also for people worried today about a market collapse or climate change or the end of democracy tomorrow. Jesus isn't saying we should pretend such things could never happen. In fact, he says such things almost certainly will happen in one form or another. But he told us in so many ways not to waste today filling up barns with stuff we think we'll need for some other day. He told us we should live like lilies and sparrows, not worrying so much about tomorrow, because today's trouble is enough for today. He told us, yes, there will be earthquakes and famines and wars in the future, but the best way to have the words and wisdom for those days when they come, is to be alert and attentive to this day. To

what's heartbreaking and hard about it, and to what's lovely and life-giving. But attentive enough to do the work we've been given to do right now, which will almost surely include the practice of being still and listening and watching for wisdom.

The Boring Conference was canceled in 2020 and hasn't come back online. Maybe we got our fill of boredom during the days of quarantine. But we're certainly back online again. Which means we're barraged, not only by armies and earthquakes, but also by information and gadgets and empty new forms of interestingness. We may need more than ever to relearn the art of boredom. Or the art of prayer, which a wise monk once told me is always one part boredom. We may need enough emptiness in our days, to be present to them. To be attentive. To be quiet and undistracted enough to wait and to watch for the wisdom we need, which God only ever gives us amidst the pain and particles of the moment we're living in right now.