

ARTICLE

Wait

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I. *“They also serve who only stand and wait.” John Milton’s Sonnet 19, When I consider how my light is spent*

I was a confident, occasionally smug believer until I was nineteen and God stopped talking to me.

On October 6, 2012, President Thomas Monson announced that sister missionaries would be allowed to serve at nineteen rather than twenty-one. On October 14, 2012, I turned nineteen. In between, all of my friends started their papers, made plans to sell their apartment contracts, hoped their boyfriends would wait for them. In between, I realized everyone I knew was leaving, and I wasn’t.

My specific cocktail of anxiety and depression plus a strong awareness of the tangled knot that is missionary work’s connection to colonialism meant that I would not go on a mission unless specifically ordered to by God. If God wanted me there, then that’s where I would be, but I didn’t know where God wanted me, because He wasn’t talking to me, so I waited.

In John Milton’s Sonnet 19, he assures us, “They also serve who only stand and wait,” but even at nineteen I knew that waiting is often the worst part. It’s Mary and Martha sitting in mourning next to Lazurus’s body and Alma and Amulek sitting in prison. It is boring and terrifying, dramatic and dull at the same time.

After six months of silence, early morning found me on my knees, sobbing in the dark. I didn’t understand how God could fail to weigh in on something so life-changing. I didn’t understand why He wasn’t talking to me—was He mad at me for not going on a mission? It didn’t feel like it. It didn’t feel like anything.

“Don’t you care?” I asked over and over. “Don’t you care about me, my life, what I do?”
Do you think you are so broken that I cannot fix you? God interrupted, the best I can translate. *Of course I care.*

It was an answer without being an answer. It was the promise that He was still there even when He wasn’t talking. It was the assurance of multiple right answers when all I wanted was for Him to tell me what to do. It was enough to send me to bed, enough for me to hold onto and remember.

II. *“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.”*
Proverbs 3:5-6

When I was twenty-three Amy¹ knocked on my door. The term “significant other” originally comes from communications theory, where it denotes a person whose well being is important to you, a person whose mannerisms and modes of communication you adopt. Amy was one of my significant others in college; we were so entwined in each other’s lives that I can’t always remember which things had happened to her and which to me.

She’d been raped four months ago, she told me. She’d thought she was handling it, but she started not remembering entire afternoons, so she’d scheduled a therapy appointment, but it’d fallen right before a final, and now she was shaking and crying, and couldn’t take the final, and would I walk with her and explain it to her professor.

I talked to her professor and bought her dinner. After I dropped her off that night, I sat outside my apartment in the car, weeping and hitting the steering wheel over and over again. I cried and shouted until my throat was raw. I’d never yelled at God before. I didn’t know what to do with this pain that by rights wasn’t mine, but which went to the bone.

She prayed. She’d been through the temple. She served faithfully. “How could you abandon her like this?” I sobbed “One word, one prompting, that’s all she would have needed. *How could you?*”

After I was out of tears, after I’d screamed myself hoarse, I sat in the car with my head on the steering wheel. It wasn’t like when I was praying about going on a mission. I could feel God there, He just wasn’t saying anything. There wasn’t anything to say, I realize now. There was nothing He could have said that I would have taken, so flushed by pain and fury.

I asked the same questions over and over for the next year and a half as I learned more about PTSD and the way that it can crack reality open. Over and over I prayed, and I didn’t get anything more than the same assurance I got when I was worried about whether or not to go on a mission. *Do you think you—any of you—are so broken that I cannot fix you? Of course I care.*

I didn’t know how to move forward with just that. The God I’d always believed in was a protector. He’d brought my great-great-grandma back from the brink of death. He’d sent angels to protect my seminary teacher from the mob of men around the corner. He sent angels and healed and guided, so why them and not my friend? And if He didn’t protect my friend, then there was no reason to think He would protect me. I knew He didn’t love me any more than her. My pain at her past was also fear in my future.

For me, it was not a matter of belief. My mom’s faith crisis, before and after I was born, inoculated me somewhat against what many of my friends were encountering. I was raised to believe that prophets are deeply flawed while still being powerful servants of God; that the Church, like every other organization, is messed up and changes slowly but nonetheless was where we do God’s work; the world is fallen but also beautiful. My parents modeled Keate’s negative capability, and I learned their cognitive dissonance the same way I picked up their speech patterns.

I’d learned to think systemically, but I still felt in specificity. My story crumbled as I encountered the evil I’d known existed but had never had to face. Encountering bad things did

¹ Name changed.

not change my belief, it challenged my trust. “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart,” Proverbs says, but what was I supposed to trust in Him to do if not save?

In the face of the question, I did what I always do: research. I mined people, literature, philosophy, theology, until I found a new way to trust. As it has always been for me, my scholarship buoyed my belief. In *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope*, Joseph Spencer writes that true theological hope exists only in the face of impossibility. Our hope in God is that there is a miracle on its way, even if we can’t see it, even if it is a long time coming, even if it is not the one we hoped for. “For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth,” Jesus promises in Matthew, but he doesn’t say that we will get what we ask for or find what we are looking for. All we can know for sure is whatever we get or find, whatever miracle comes, it comes out of impossibility.

Over the next few years, I watched my friend heal. It was never what I wanted it to look like. I wanted the slate wiped clean, the burden lifted. I wanted her to never have to think or feel about it again. Instead, the healing was slow and painful, more like the mending of a bone that will never be the same than the swift retreat of a virus. The impossibility I wanted was not the one that came. I wanted her to be who she was before; instead, she became someone who knew the depths of pain and could be OK (at least some of the time) in the midst of it.

I had to give up on my God who could be counted on to protect and instead discover a God who heals. He saves sometimes, unpredictably, impossibly, often invisibly. But when He doesn’t save, He always heals. This became my faith.

III. “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.” The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis

There’s a danger in telling these stories of seeming triumphalist. I didn’t go on a mission, and it was fine! My friend is OK at least some of the time! God loves us and heals us, so the pain doesn’t matter! These triumphalist stories aren’t truthful ways of narrating our past experience but, worse than that, they erase any empathy we may have learned. We’re likely to brush off the lived realities of others who are in pain, whose questions are still burning. There are always living pain and questions, and if anything these experiences should invite us to mourn with those that mourn, to remember what it is to live in that darkness of the soul.

In the oldest version we have of Mark, the oldest of our gospels, the text ends on chapter sixteen, verse eight. A young man, dressed in white, assured Mary and the other women disciples that Jesus was not in the tomb because he was risen and urged them to spread the word, but “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

That’s it. That’s where it ends. They saw the empty tomb and left afraid, not knowing what it meant. It’s the most gripping, most important cliffhanger in the history of the world, and these days we skip right past it. We forget to wait.

People are usually afraid when they encounter angels or God in the scriptures. It is not a comfortable experience. Coming face-to-face with divinity usually requires us to reevaluate the ways we have misunderstood it. Over and over again, I’ve had to relearn my God. I’ve experienced and then regrouped, researched and read and prayed and lived and waited until I’ve found God again. I’ve learned how seriously He takes agency, how willing He is to let us suffer

and to be with us in our suffering. He lets us wait. He is not a wish-granter or a grand protector. But He does heal. He is, to paraphrase C.S. Lewis, not safe or tame—but He is good. God, He is good.