



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 15, 2019

ISAIAH 35:1-10; CANTICLE 15 (THE SONG OF MARY); JAMES 5:7-10; MATTHEW 11:2-11

WAITING AT THRESHOLDS



Matthew 11:2-11 *[When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”]*

The National Nordic Museum in Ballard has a delightful special exhibit on view now

through mid-January, featuring the work of renowned Danish artist Laurits Andersen

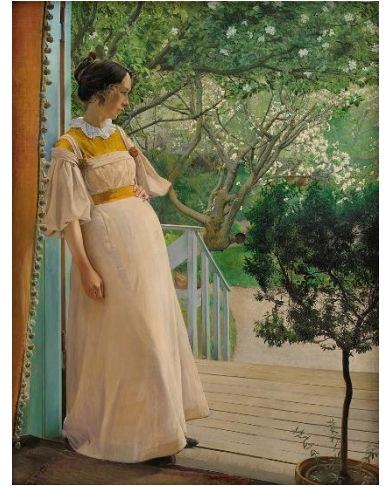
Ring on loan from the National Gallery of Denmark. The collection draws inspiration from several themes expressed in LA Ring's broad swaths of talent, as he skillfully merged late 19th Century symbolism with a turn-of-the-century social realism, set against the backdrop of his beloved Denmark. His work still speaks a layered truth that resonates a hundred years hence, reaching across the expanse between his perspective and ours.ⁱⁱ

Kathy and I visited last week, and we found the collection marvelously curated in a spare dark-walled room, silent but for a few whispers, allowing the paintings to tell their stories uninterrupted. One of the themes in the collection was that of waiting, and the fact that our visit came in the season of Advent was not lost on me.



One painting was entitled "Thaw," a small landscape in which winter's white blanket frays to reveal patches of dark clods of earthen promise eagerly waiting to press their gifts of fertile hope into action. One must wait patiently for the season to turn. (I have included images of this and a few others in the manuscript available in the narthex and on the website.)ⁱⁱⁱ

Another massive portrait depicts "The Artist's Wife, in the Garden's Door," drawing on a scene of a threshold often employed by LA Ring to present a moment of waiting



to pass over.^{iv} This masterpiece reveals a transition from the brightly alive thick apricot drapes and a fine yellow dress worn by his young wife inside, to the darker hues of green and blue outside in the garden.

The garden declares a scene of fecundity, his wife waiting at the door, leaning against the frame, peering into the garden. Myrtle blooms, mythologically connected to Aphrodite and her playful and profligate fertility, hang over her head in replete delight

that the dance of spring has ensued. Indeed, the artist's wife has a belly gently distended suggesting she is with child, but this was painted two years before she would give birth to their daughter. She waits at the threshold, with her new husband's hope and hers having conjugated with anticipation, contemplating what may yet come.

And Mary's Magnificat comes to mind, revealing another threshold between heaven and earth, distant orbits brought close by the courage of a woman who said yes to God. And Mary's visit to cousin Elizabeth who, in her old age, has her baby leaping in her womb as the sign that all the waiting has been worth it. And we, too, are invited to rejoice at the prospect that the door is flung open wide to let this holy child of hope crossed the threshold of our fear and enter our lives anew.

There was one other painting in the collection that I want to describe also. Another threshold scene, with door of the cottage open, an elderly man



standing just inside, peering out and up, bundled in coat and hat, collar turned up, leaning forward to step out, but hesitating, waiting just inside the doorway. The tones are hazy and gray, drab, tired hues both inside and out, late autumn or early winter. It's worth noting that Ring painted this one as he approached the end of his own life. Mindful of another threshold.

The piece is entitled "Has It Stopped Raining?" and the man could easily be in Seattle were it not for the umbrella he holds in his left hand.

Whether from Seattle or not, the man speaks his truth to us, older and perhaps wiser, as he lingers at the door of uncertainty—uncertainty about the rain, but also about the world into which he is stepping, about what the day holds for him.

We cannot ever really know for sure, can we?

And John the Baptist leaps to mind, this time older, and perhaps wiser, but uncertain, too, and from the tenuous circumstance of prison, his spare dark-walled room, silent but for a few whispers, collar turned up in the cold, knowing he will soon cross a threshold of no return. And in that moment, he murmurs a profound question in humble tones, asking Jesus to help him make sense of his life, his prophetic purpose. Was it worth it?

Has his paving a way made a difference? Did all that time standing in the wilderness and the turbulent waters of baptismal conversion make a difference? Did the desert bloom? Can the wilderness of life really be a place of gladness? Are you the one, Jesus, tell me, so I can make meaning in my life.

And Jesus sends back a message of sublime good news, claiming the mantle of another

prophet Isaiah whose words John would have known well, and been buoyed by them: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

My friends, we risk rendering these declarations impotent if we take them to be just quaint statements of healing physical ailments, some messianic wave to remove a cataract, or a tender touch to apply miracle salve to clear a rash. There is much more at stake here, spiritually.

Physical ailments in Jesus' day were seen as the consequence of sin, divine retribution for spiritual weakness that rendered them unworthy of God's acceptance, a punishment that translated into religious judgment and ostracism. A miserable existence. But the healing of them represented more than relief of the physical blemish; it spelled restoration

to full relationship with God. Good news. Distant orbits of heaven and earth brought close by the courage of people like John who said yes to God in his own right, as he prepared the way for the one who is to come.

en days before Christmas, when we rejoice that the holy child of hope is born to us once more, we wait, and in the waiting, we are invited to contemplate Mary's courage, and Elizabeth's joy, and John's humility. We are invited to ponder all these things in our hearts, and consider what questions we would bring to Jesus.

What might stir us to cross the threshold into a world that yearns for good news, that longs to be restored to the fullness of life, that hungers for the words and actions born by us, as God-bearers, ready to say yes to God.

What are you waiting for? And how will you know?

ⁱ <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/et/record/2020903/KMS3636.html>

ⁱⁱ Some of the background of his art collection and life history are drawn from <https://www.nordicmuseum.org/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L._A._Ring

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/et/record/2020903/KMS7709.html>

^{iv} Photo of painting at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_the_garden_door._The_artist%27s_wife#/media/File:I_havedøren._Kunstnerens_hustru.jpg.