

Waiting for God

Rev. Glenda
Simpkins Hoffman

Acts 1:3-14

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*But the
experience of
waiting is not
just for
parents; it is
really
universal.*

Last week, Pete kicked off this new series on Acts as part of God's Big Story. And Pete focused on Acts 1:8 as Jesus promised the power of the Spirit and commissioned the disciples to be his witnesses to the end of the world. This is not new information, as Jesus had instructed them about what was about to happen, but the truth is they really could not grasp the significance of the dynamic, life-changing experience of Pentecost until it happened.

So what really captivates me in this whole passage is the phrase from verse 4: "While staying with them, [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father..." For the next few minutes, I want to reflect with you on the spiritual practice of waiting.

Waiting is a constant theme in the scriptures. It is not a new idea. This week, the psalms and the prophets are full of exhortations to wait for the Lord. Today is Mother's Day, and every mother knows that parenthood begins with a season of waiting. Pregnancy is actually an important part of preparing for the new role and responsibility of parenthood—not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually.

While I have never been pregnant, I have learned a lot about

preparing for parenthood through waiting. In fact, this past week was our son Nate's "gotcha day." We "got him," or adopted him, six years ago. I will never forget that day. But that joyous day was preceded by years of disappointments, infertility treatments, adoption procedures, and waiting, and waiting, and waiting and waiting. And I have to tell you, it was hard. Of course, the waiting isn't over after birth or adoption. Parenthood involves a lot more waiting.

But the experience of waiting is not just for parents; it is really universal. Like it or not, we are all waiting for something. The world is waiting for this recession to be over. Some are waiting for new jobs. Others are waiting for healing, some are waiting for closure, some are waiting for new opportunities, some are waiting for reconciliation, and some are even waiting for that moment when they will leave their earthly bodies to be with the Lord.

It's hard to wait in our Western culture. We don't even like to sit at a stop light for 15 seconds or stand in a line for more than just a few minutes. Everything comes to us fast or instantly. So we are conditioned by our culture to be impatient people, who want things to happen now! I wish I had a dollar for every time I heard another say or I said myself, "I am not a patient person; I don't like waiting."

It is hard to do, because it is in times of waiting that we really confront the truth that we are not in control.

But waiting is a significant part of the spiritual life. It just is. I have found that it is in this season of waiting, when it seems that nothing is happening, in fact, God is working, preparing me, preparing others, preparing a situation in ways I cannot control or predict or plan.

It's in these moments when we feel so helpless that we become painfully aware of our own powerlessness. Most of us keep so busy and so distracted. We don't want to feel a twinge of sadness, or longing for something more. But sometimes we encounter circumstances that bring a deep sense of longing to the surface in a way that most of us don't ever let ourselves feel. But when we let it come to the surface, it opens us to God, because it's then we realize how much we need him. He comes to us—maybe not in the way we want, but in new, surprising, and unexpected ways.

This is the experience of these disciples. They had been through a lot. They had witnessed the brutal death of Christ as well as his miraculous resurrection. They were trying to make sense of it all. Even though they had been taught by Jesus for three years, they had to be reoriented to those teachings through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus understood their experience, but he also knew what was coming. Their longing would be fulfilled in a way they could not imagine. When the Spirit would descend upon them at Pentecost, their lives—and the

world—would be forever changed. But first they had to wait.

Now how you responded to those few moments of waiting for me to begin talking again probably tells you something about how you feel about waiting. When I stopped doing what you expected me to do, how did you feel? What happened inside of you? I have often told people when counseling them that waiting is an important part of the spiritual life. And the response to those words is almost always, But waiting is the hardest thing to do. That is true. Because as we wait, we realize there is nothing we can do. It is hard to do, because it is in times of waiting that we really confront the truth that we are not in control. And most of us live our lives believing that we are in control. So when something happens that we don't expect and can't predict or control, we often try to manipulate, control, and to make things happen, even when there is nothing we can do.

This point came home to me in a very powerful way just months before the adoption of our younger son, Ian. We had done everything we could do, and all we could do was wait for a birth mother to choose us. I remember one point when I was feeling especially out of control as we had experienced a number of disappointments in the adoption process, and I began to notice how my mind was working in an attempt to control what I could not control through over-analyzing. I was driving myself crazy trying to figure things out—to predict, plan

Waiting is important, because as we wait, we learn to really let go.

and control possible outcomes of our longed-for adoption. And as I noticed this in myself, I also began to notice it in others as well.

Even when we are left with no alternative—even when we really can't do anything but wait for the Lord—our hearts and our minds are churned up with worry or anxiety and compulsion to figure things out. These attempts to control what we can't control keep us from hearing God's voice and recognizing His presence with us and yielding to His sovereignty. Waiting is important, because as we wait, we learn to really let go.

Waiting enables us to relinquish whatever it is we are holding on to so we can receive from God what He has for us in His time and in His way. We literally and figuratively have to let go. It's a time where we take our hands off—of our lives and our circumstances and recognize that we are not in control. We learn to let go of our ideas of how life ought to be, who God ought to be. We learn to let go of our worry, our anxiety. And as we let go of these things and wait on the Lord, we receive new understanding of who God really is, what life is really about, who I am in the midst of all that is happening. As we wait, we are opened to new possibilities for the Lord to do what only he can do. Waiting is the process of relinquishing and being made ready to receive.

Even in this passage, we see this. Look at verses 6-7. Remember that the disciples had a political agenda and a political idea of

what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. They really expected him to overthrow Rome and usher in the kingdom and restore Israel's national independence. Even after Christ's death and resurrection, they still were looking for a kingdom in which they could exercise power.

Notice how Jesus responds. Instead of political power in a human kingdom, Jesus said they would receive power from the Holy Spirit. They have to relinquish their old ideas about power and the kingdom. As they wait, they are prepared to receive the new thing God has for them—the power of the Holy Spirit that will be greater and more wonderful than any earthly kingdom ever could be.

Not only do they have to let go of their old ideas, they have to relinquish Jesus himself in order to receive the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had been preparing the disciples for this moment for some time. There would be no more resurrection appearances of Christ. He will no longer be their constant companion in his human body as he had been for three years. In his incarnate and resurrected body, Jesus would never be able to do in and for and through the disciples what the Holy Spirit will do as he indwells them and empowers them for life and ministry. As Jesus ascends to the Father, the disciples finally have to let go of Jesus and their ideas about what life would be like in order to receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

This passage not only lifts up the importance of waiting and what's involved in terms of letting go and

The kind of waiting the Lord wants from us is an active engagement in the reality of his kingdom right here, right now.

letting God. It also instructs us as to how we are to wait. The kind of waiting the Lord wants from us is an active engagement in the reality of his kingdom right here, right now. In the weeks ahead, we will see what that engagement looks like in terms of outward witness, but this passage really highlights three critically important practices that are important for all disciples.

In verse 12, the passage makes clear that waiting is a community project—not something we do alone. We are to wait in solidarity with friends. The apostles do not scatter and go their separate ways to await a private Spirit-filling or a personal experience of divine faithfulness. They “were joined together” in a specific place to wait for God’s action on them all.

We cannot say this enough. Our faith is not an independent study. It is not an individual endeavor. Our faith in Christ is meant to be lived in a community. The people gathered in this upper room were the very people that Jesus had mentored for three years. He had not only called them to himself, he had called them together into community. And here we see the bond they shared. In the midst of this uncertain time of waiting for God, they knew enough to do it together. We need each other. We are meant to share one another’s joys and burdens.

We all need a trusted few—beyond our family circle—to wait with us in the difficult times of life. We emphasize small groups in this church because we are

committed to helping people nurture spiritual friendships.

This week, I gathered together with two groups I have been leading for the past nine months as we reflected on how God has transformed individually and worked through our small group. And I also met with some of the small group leaders and the coordinators of Sunday morning adult education classes. I was truly moved to hear many share the blessings they have experienced as a result of gathering together with others to study God’s word and to pray together. Small groups are not a program of our church, they are a means of sharing the journey. They provide a context for connecting with others as we wait on the Lord together.

Beyond coming together, the passage even tells us what is helpful to do as we wait for God. Verse 14 says, “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer....” The community of faith waited by praying. Notice they are not praying for God to bless them, because He already has. Nor do they pray that God will fulfill the promise He has made, for they are confident that He will. Praying together publicly demonstrates the importance of their resolve to wait on the Lord—together. As we study Acts, we will see the early church regularly gathering together and praying together followed by miraculous feats. This is not some strange coincidence. Prayer often precedes doing the tasks given by the Spirit’s power. We—the community of God—will have nothing to say that

“Mary agreed to allow God to deprive her of the one thing we count most basic among our natural rights—the right of self-control. Mary simply trusts God knew best.”

-David Benner

matters without God’s full participation in all that we are doing. The substance of what we proclaim and live as good news must first of all be grounded in a community that is given over to constant prayer and worship.

The disciples also spent time studying the scripture. If you read Acts 1:15ff, you will see that they were reflecting on the significance of events and trying to understand them in light of what Scripture had to say. These disciples were thoroughly grounded in God’s Big Story and His redemptive work in history.

This is important. The Holy Spirit does not work in an intellectual vacuum; nor is Christian witness effective if it merely testifies to the experience of God’s salvation without being able to interpret meaning for all of life. We, too, need to be grounded in God’s Big Story and have a theological understanding of how our lives fit into redemptive history. Without this, our lives are impoverished and our witness to the world is weakened.

So we see that waiting involves giving ourselves over to God. We do that by gathering together in community, praying together and learning and reflecting on Scripture together. These practices connect us to God and to each other, and they shape us into the people God wants us to be—both individually and corporately.

Not only does this passage instruct us about waiting, it also provides a wonderful example of someone who understood this

process. Imbedded in verse 14 and listed among those gathered in the Upper Room is Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is a model disciple and one who thoroughly understands what it means to wait for promise of the Father. She had already experienced the Holy Spirit coming upon her when she conceived the Lord and carried him in her body. Remember her response when she heard the news? “Let it be to done to me according to your word.”

In his book *Desiring God’s Will*, David Benner writes, “Mary was the first to accept that redemption should take place in the way we do not want it to take place; ruining all our plans, all our expectations, causing them to fail. Mary agreed to allow God to deprive her of the one thing we count most basic among our natural rights—the right of self-control. Mary simply trusts God knew best. The demands on Mary’s trust in God did not end at the annunciation.... At every point, even standing at the foot of his cross and giving her son back to God, Mary freely offered her unequivocal consent to God’s will.”

And so we see her again after the ascension of her son finding her place in the new community as a part of the family of God’s... praying... reflecting on Scripture... waiting for the promise of the Father to God... waiting for the coming of the Spirit... waiting for the return of the Lord. She is a model for all of us about how we are to live and how we are to wait.

On this Mother’s Day, what strikes me most about Mary is that after the grief she has been through

Waiting is the practice that really helps us to surrender to God.

seeing her son brutally killed, she is engaged with others in the things that really matter most. She is a model of someone who kept first things first. In his book *Sacred Parenting*, Gary Thomas encourages every parent to ask his children a very insightful question. “What do you think your daddy and mommy feel most passionate about? If the gospel doesn’t come to mind, they may have picked up that we really care about avoiding embarrassment over their behavior, having a clean house, getting them into the best schools, or having a straight-A report card....” Our kids probably best reveal whether we are modeling what matters most... waiting on God together.

Waiting is the practice that really helps us to surrender to God. Waiting shapes us in such a way that we can trust the heart of God, we can trust the love of God. As I look out on this congregation, I know many are waiting—waiting for God to do what only God can do. This passage has something to say to all of us.