

May 4, 2008
Acts 1:3-11
Dr. W. Glen Bell

“Power for God’s People”

We waited a long time.

We did all the things you would have expected, indeed, all the things that so many of us have done. We painted the nursery, put together the crib and thought carefully about exactly what kind of toys the baby would enjoy. We were conscientious about prenatal vitamins and obstetrical visits. We acquainted ourselves with the maternity wing of the local hospital and with the “ins and outs” of the Lamaze method. We read every page of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.

The day finally came. We hurried to the hospital. And we waited.

And we waited.

We waited through one round after another of contractions. I worried; I prayed; I hoped for the best. She suffered; she endured; she persisted through it all.

The local hospital was not overly fancy. No beautiful, well-appointed combination rooms for both labor and delivery. Instead, there was a separate area for delivery and that room was right next door.

Hour after hour, we waited. Hour after hour, we heard beds being rolled down the hallway into the adjacent delivery room and later, the loud cries of newborn babies.

Hour after hour, we listened, until finally we were hearing the birth of brand new babies whose mothers had begun labor long after our arrival at the hospital.

Finally, at 5:30 the next morning, the doctor shared the bad news: A C-section was necessary. They hustled us into the operating room and, in only a few minutes, our son was delivered. His loud wailing filled the room as he eagerly announced his arrival.

Seventeen years later, I am grateful to announce that Matt is a healthy, happy teenager, of whom his mother and father are very proud.

We waited . . . and our hopes were fulfilled.

We waited . . . and our prayers were answered.

Our scripture lesson begins this morning with an invitation to waiting. If you think about it, that is a strange kind of invitation. Just in the last few weeks, Anne and I have received a number of invitations – to a Kentucky Derby party, to our nephew’s college graduation, to the wedding of the daughter of a friend. Those are the kind of invitations we expect: invitations to happenings, to goings-on, to big events.

But today, Christ’s disciples are invited simply to wait. The lesson from Acts begins as they have witnessed his resurrection and Jesus appears to them during the forty-day period following the opening of his empty tomb. The apostles are awestruck by the living Christ and we imagine them eager, ready, energized by Easter to proclaim the great good news.

But as they chomp at the bit, eager at the starting gate, Jesus stops them in their tracks. He orders them not to leave

Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.

Now, we humans tend to have a love/hate relationship with promises. We yearn for their fulfillment; we look forward to a grand culmination. But we have such a hard time enduring all the waiting.

We cannot stand all the aphorisms of childhood and youth, “When you’re a little older . . .,” or “Wait till next year . . .” or “It will all happen in due time . . .” So it doesn’t surprise us at all to hear that the disciples are full of all kinds of pressing questions.

“Is this it, Lord? Is this the moment?” “Will you bring in your kingdom on this day, at this time, at this place?” “Is the future now?”

Jesus gently chides them for pressing for specifics and he promises them power when they receive the coming Holy Spirit. Then he disappears into heaven. No closure, no denouement, no end of the story. Instead only a promise – and waiting.

Of course, you and I know how the story goes on from here. On this Ascension Sunday we are only one week away from Pentecost, that occasion where – with the rush of a mighty wind – the Holy Spirit was granted to those first disciples. They indeed received power when the Spirit fell upon them and they became Christ’s witnesses in the neighborhood, throughout the city and around the world.

But not today. Today we and they sit with only a promise, waiting.

“Waiting,” writes Will Willimon, [is] “an onerous burden for us computerized and technically impatient moderns who live in an age of instant everything. [It] is one of the tough tasks of the church. Our waiting implies that the things which need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort.”

Waiting, I believe, is one of the ways we actively respond to God and reflect the reality that we are created in God’s image. As we wait, we affirm the significance of our witness, while at the same time acknowledging that our perspective is not as important as the work of the Lord. As we wait, we open ourselves to growth and change and spiritual development, freeing ourselves for something beyond and greater than ourselves.

We experience this reality every time we find ourselves together in prayer. “Prayer,” testifies our Presbyterian Book of Order, “is the heart of worship. In prayer, people seek after and are found by the one true God . . . They listen and wait upon God.”

Prayer exemplifies holy and faithful waiting. At one and the same moment, we pour out our concerns and hopes for our world, our community, our family and friends; but as we offer them up, we also realize that fully transforming those situations is beyond us.

Just last week the Chicago Tribune reported on the “24-7 Prayer” Movement, emphasizing “disciplined, communal worship.” As one participant said, “There is such energy in prayer that you can’t come away from [the] experience without feeling something.”

We, and all our brothers and sisters in Christ, wait and pray and hope and, sometimes, the people and situations for whom we pray are healed. We, and all our brothers and sisters in Christ, wait and pray and hope and, sometimes, those people and situations are not healed in our timing or in our sight.

I believe God calls us to embrace this holy waiting, to practice the sometimes painful discipline of waiting on God in hope and trust. I believe this kind of waiting prepares us for the anointing and direction of God’s Holy Spirit.

Oh, there are many kinds of waiting that aren't particularly holy. We wait and hope on the playground to be chosen first for our friend's team. We wait and hope to make the cheer leading squad or the football team, to receive the admissions letter from our first-choice college. We wait for the market finally to turn up and the dollar to gain strength, hoping the last interest rate cut will do the trick and the recession will prove to be shallow and brief. These kinds of waiting are neutral and ordinary, and there isn't anything especially holy about them.

Then, there is waiting that is especially unholy. We wait in the doctor's office for that next new physician, the one who might write us yet another prescription for the painkiller that we crave every moment of every day. Or, we wait for the results of the game or race with sweaty palms, with that combined sick fear and thrilling hope, knowing yet once again we have wagered far too much on the outcome. Or, we wait for the second or third glance of that attractive person at the next table, while we conveniently neglect to remember the wedding ring on our hand. This is unholy waiting.

Finally, there are other moments when waiting is neither faithful nor appropriate. This week the United Nations World Food Program estimated that one hundred million of the world's poorest people cannot afford to purchase food. On Thursday, President Bush called on Congress to significantly increase funding for the hungry of the world. In Christ's name, we cannot wait for someone else to address the problem.

Similarly, we cannot wait for someone else to teach the children, visit the sick and imprisoned, or to feed the hungry. God calls each of us to use our many gifts actively and responsibly each day.

But, along with ordinary waiting, unholy waiting and inappropriate waiting, there is also holy waiting, the very kind of hesitation of which Jesus speaks to his disciples and to us.

Holy waiting happens in the silence of confession at morning worship, when we truly admit our failings and wait for God's healing.

Holy waiting happens in the stirring music of our sanctuary choir or our organ, when somehow, somehow, we know that God is real and present and we look for hope and trust to renew our hearts.

Holy waiting happens at bedside, when the cancer has reached its final stage and in the midst of family conflict, when we worry there is no way forward. Holy waiting happens when we are almost sure within ourselves that we have nothing left – and then, somehow, we again experience God accomplishing far more than we could ever ask or think or imagine.

One of the most poignant moments of holy waiting in the Bible occurs in the parable of the prodigal son. The father's youngest son has abandoned his family and after squandering everything in loose living, he ventures home. As he returns, he finds his loving father waiting, simply waiting. With hope and trust, the father has committed himself to holy waiting. And "while [the son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

Henri Nouwen describes the meaning of the scene in this way. "Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless."

This day, the living God invites us to holy waiting, to live in hope and trust, through thick and thin, that we may discover anew our awesome Lord, the One whose only desire is to bless. And as we wait, may we be prepared to receive the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, that we may live and serve with gladness and energy and gratitude, to the glory of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.