Hurry up and Wait
Psalm 27
WRCOB
September 7, 2025
Tracy Hartman

What have you been waiting for lately? It seems like we've been in a long season of waiting, doesn't it? For several years, we waited for the pandemic to end, for schools and businesses to fully reopen. We waited and longed for things to get back to "normal," even though "normal" wasn't working so well in many cases. We wait and hope the economy will improve, or that the medical treatment we're receiving will work. And now, here at church, you are back in a season of waiting on a new pastor. Is anyone else having a hard time getting excited about waiting on one more thing right now, even if it's a good thing?

If we're honest, it's hard to wait, isn't it? We're so used to getting what we want, when we want it. In our everyday lives, if our phones take more than a few seconds to answer our Google query, or if the drive through is backed up, we get impatient. And then there are the more serious things like waiting to hear back from

a job interview or for the results of a biopsy – those waits can be agonizing! I can only imagine how the nation of Israel felt as they waited year after year, generation after generation for the Messiah to come.

I know that we're still three months away from Advent, but when I think about waiting, I think about the birth narratives. After centuries of waiting, when the time was right it happened, God chose to enter the world as Immanuel, God with us. But it didn't happen overnight did it? Even after God announced that the Messiah was coming, folks still had to wait. And they waited in a number of different ways. We'll talk about their stories in depth when we actually get to Advent, but let's take a glimpse this morning.

When the angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary she was understandably perplexed and confused, "How can this be?" she wondered. After the angel told her more, she was quick to answer the call, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord let it be with me according to your word." Even though Mary got on board quickly, her wait wasn't an easy one. At first Joseph wanted to call off their

engagement, and I'm sure there was plenty of gossip. Is that why she left town to visit Elizabeth? We don't know for sure, but once she arrived, the Holy Spirit confirmed that God was with her, and Scripture records her song of praise. (PAUSE)

Joseph had quite a different reaction to the news didn't he? I picture him as the classic "fixer." Once he heard the news, he decided not wait, he sprang into action. He loved Mary, but all of this God talk couldn't possibly be true, he would dismiss her quietly and hope the scandal died down quickly – for her sake and for his. (PAUSE) Is anyone here a spring into action fixer? It took a visit from an angel in Joseph's dream to help him calm down and commit himself to Mary as they waited together for the baby to arrive. (PAUSE)

I think about many of the religious leaders – and many of the lay people – who were waiting for the wrong thing. They were looking for a literal king who would overthrow Rome and reestablish the earthly kingdom of Israel. What happens when we wait for the wrong thing?

We miss or almost miss the real thing that appears right in front of us. Can anyone relate to that experience?

And then there were the magi and Simeon and Anna in the temple. The magi recognized the star in the sky and began a two year journey to Bethlehem. Simeon and Anna knew who Jesus was as soon as his parents brought him into the temple. How did these folks know? Because they were tuned in, and they were patient. Because they were watching carefully and prayerfully, they knew the signs when they saw them, and they read the signs correctly. (PAUSE)

The psalm that we heard earlier talks about putting our trust in God in the midst of challenging times. Was this psalm a comfort to Mary and Joseph? Did it help Anna and Simeon all the years they watched and waited for the Messiah? I'd like to think it helped them. And it can help us too.

Scholars suggest that this psalm is a bit of a hybrid – parts of it were likely addressed to a worshipping congregation and part of it is addressed to God directly.

In the first few verses, the writer makes two pretty bold announcement about God. He or she writes, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" And this is not prosperity theology here, it's not pie in the sky belief – in the next verses he continues, "When – not if but when – evildoers assail me; though an army encamps against me, though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident." This is not faith and trust when things are going well, this is faith and trust in the midst of the messiness of life.

After appealing to God directly in the middle of the psalm, the writer concludes, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord."

How might we do that? I'm so glad you asked! Psalm 15 begins, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." In Israelite worship, to lift up one's soul meant to lift up one's hands[i] – empty hands that were vulnerable and open to receive whatever help the Lord chose to provide.

This posture shows that even in the midst of difficult circumstances, the psalmist is entrusting his or her life to God. He or she knows that God is good and faithful, loving and merciful. The psalmist chooses to wait and live in hope,[ii] asking God, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths, lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation." Instead of living for himself, he assumes a posture of humility, asking God not to remember his transgressions, but to lead him humbly in what is right. (PAUSE)

So many things in our lives are in flux right now. We're still dealing with COVID, the deep divisions in our country aren't getting any better, the economy is still shaky, and now you must search for a new minister. A pastor friend of mine reminded me recently that "Change is a given, but growth is a choice." I invite you to hear that again. "Change is a given, but growth is a choice."

Although it may feel like hurry up and wait in so many areas of our lives, we have choices about how we wait; and about whether or not we will choose to grow as

we face the sea changes happening all around us. We can be anxious and rush to try to fix things. Or we can choose to lean into and embrace this time of great transition -- not only in the world at large, but right here in our congregation.

Ed Catmull of Pixar Studios once said, “There is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens; the key is to be able to linger there without panicking.”[iii] The period of time between an ending and a new beginning is often referred to as a liminal space or a liminal season. Liminal seasons can be challenging, disorienting, and unsettling. This in-between time gives us the opportunity to unlearn old behaviors, challenge the status quo, take risks and to learn. And that’s hard work. But liminal seasons can also be marked by excitement and innovation. The promise of a new beginning unleashes creative energy, potential and passion. Susan Beaumont asserts that all truly great innovations are incubated in liminality, and that God’s greatest work occurs in liminal seasons.[iv]

Theologian Richard Rohr puts it this way, "All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of 'business as usual' and remain patiently on the 'threshold' where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown, There alone,' he says, 'is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible…This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed…The threshold is God's waiting room. Here we are taught openness and patience as we come to expect an appointment with the divine Doctor. (PAUSE)

And so we begin a new season together, as I walk alongside you as you continue the work of preparing for a new pastor. My prayer is that we will experience this time to the fullest; that we will be content to wait – not anxiously, not passively, but humbly and expectantly. Not jumping ahead of God trying to fix things, but putting ourselves in a position, where like the magi and

Anna and Simeon, we know the right thing the minute we see it. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The promise may not be full at hand. It may still be on the way, but to live reverently, deliberately and fully awake – that is what it means to live in the promise, where the wait itself is as rich as its end."[v] May it be so for each of us and all of us as we begin this journey together.

I invite you know to bow your head and close your eyes. I invite you to lift your soul to the Lord, as the psalmist did. As an expression of your trust in God, I invite you to open your hands and turn your palms up. It's hard, isn't it, to be vulnerable in this way? But the truth is that God can't put something new into our hands if they are clenched, or if we are holding on to something else. What might God be calling you to release so that you can fully lean into this liminal season? Is it your desire to be in control? Are you anxious or even afraid of what you might lose if you let go? What if there is something much better just around the corner? Or perhaps it is pain or hard feelings that you've been holding on to. Wouldn't it

be wonderful to be free of that burden? Listen quietly and allow God to speak to your heart. In the quietness of these moments, I invite you to take a deep breath, and begin to let go. (PAUSE) I invite you to pray along with the psalmist, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for are the God of my salvation, for you I wait all day long."

I invite you today to claim with me the promise of Isaiah 40:31 Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. Amen.

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[i] Robin G. Branch, "Exegetical Perspective," Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 1, Louisville: Wetsminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 9.
[ii] J. Clinton McCann, New Interpreter's Bible, 777.
[iii] Susan Beaumont, How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going. Lanham MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2019, 1.
[iv] Ibid., 1,2.
[v] Randle R. Mixon, "Homiletical Perspective," Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 13