

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“How Long, O Lord? How long?”

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“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13:1-2).

We spend much of our lives waiting. We wait to be old enough to go to school. We wait to ride a bicycle. We wait to get a driver’s license, to graduate. We wait to land a job, meet the right person. We wait for a promotion, a raise, for success. All our lives we wait for security, which eludes us all our lives, no matter how much we have. We wait for retirement. And yes, at the end, many wait for the sleep of death.

Some of our waiting is with high anticipation: for the wedding, the birth, the vacation. Some of our waiting is fearful. Lying in bed at night, unable to sleep, waiting for your teenager to come home, listening for the sound of the garage door opening. I know; I’ve done it.

We are not very good at waiting. In fact, most of us think of it as a waste of time. We are not a patient people. A flight is delayed at the airport, a long line is ahead of you at Kohl’s, a meeting grinds on and on beyond the point of relevance or usefulness, a doctor’s appointment leaves us sitting in a waiting room for an hour . . . these things can have an impact on our pulse, our blood pressure, our vocabulary.

Our culture does not reward or applaud waiting. Our culture celebrates taking action, getting results. Our culture pursues instant gratification. If we want it, we want it now. We feel entitled to it – not weeks or months from now, but now. And so on Black Friday there is a surge at the doors, and people running down the aisles, people who haven’t run for years.

Someone once suggested that sometimes, the best advice to follow is not “Don’t just sit there, do something” which can get us into all kinds of trouble. Sometimes the best advice is, “Don’t just do something; sit there.” That is, think it through. Don’t react. Be patient. Choose your words and actions carefully. Wait a while.

Waiting is a major biblical theme.

Ps. 25:5, “I wait for the Lord all day long.”

Ps. 27:14, “Wait for the Lord.”

Ps. 130:5, “I will wait for the Lord.”

Hosea 12:6, “Wait continually for your God.”

Micah 7:7, “Wait for the God of salvation.”

And a favorite from Psalm 27, “Wait for the Lord. Be strong and take heart. Wait for the Lord” (v. 14). In the Bible, waiting for the Lord is another way to put your trust in him. So in Isaiah 40 we read, “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” (v. 31).

There's a lot of waiting in the Bible, and often in circumstances that are bleak and not at all hopeful. I'm thinking of Joseph as he languished in an Egyptian prison. I'm thinking of Abraham and Sarah, having been promised a child . . . how long they had to wait, long after all human experience has given up.

We wait as individuals. We wait collectively as God's people. For generations, God's people were slaves in Egypt waiting for redemption. After that, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, waiting for the Promised Land. Then, after they were given that good land, it was taken away again for their disobedience and unfaithfulness. Soundly thrashed by Babylonians, they were humiliated and expelled from their homes. They watched as the Babylonians reduced their beloved city and its magnificent temple into a smoldering heap of rubble. And then they were forcibly marched into a foreign land where they would have to wait seventy years before the Lord would see fit to release them from captivity.

In Advent we remember those people and we sing: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here." But we're not referring just to those people of old. There's another layer of meaning to that hymn, one that hits much closer to home because we, in a way, are not yet free. We are held captive . . . by sin and death. In Romans 7, Paul describes this bondage, "For I have the *desire* to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing . . . it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. . . Wretched man that I am! Who shall rescue me from this body of death?" So God's ancient people don't have a monopoly on exile and captivity and waiting. It's also a part of your life and mine. And so we sing, "O come, O come." We wait for the Lord. Along with the psalmist we ask, "How long, O Lord? How long?" How long before you make it right again? How long before you stir up your power and come?

It's a psalm attributed to David. My study Bible says this text is "best understood as having been written while David was being pursued by King Saul." You remember the story: Saul was given to fits of anxiety and sadness so severe he could hardly function. One person able to bring him out of it was David. With his lyre David could have charmed the birds out of the trees; he was certainly able to soothe the frayed nerves of King Saul.

The Lord is with David in many ways. This little musician goes on to become a national hero when he slays the giant Philistine named Goliath. The people love it. "Saul has slain his thousands" they say, "but David his ten thousands." On the outside Saul applauds David's courage and skill, but inside he's a smoldering, dangerous wreck of a man. In the palace, he even flings a spear at the national hero but misses. David runs for his life. Saul orders his army out after him. David goes into hiding. It's during this time, presumably, that David writes this psalm.

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" You and I were taught in confirmation to begin our prayers with thanksgiving and praise. It's the decent thing to do rather than "Dear God, give me this . . . or do that for me." But when the suffering is acute . . . when the distress is intense, we may not have the heart or time to begin with the niceties. In this psalm, David gets right down to business. "How long, O Lord? How long?"

Whoever you are, the psalms are written for you. They are prayers you can pray. You can wrap this ancient psalm of David around your own life, and somehow, it will fit. “How long, O Lord? Must I have sorrow in my heart all the day?” How long, Lord, before the one I love makes a clean break from addiction? How long until you bless us with a child? How long, Lord, before I find good work so I can support my family? How long, until you give me relief from the shingles or the vertigo or the nausea or the shortness of breath? How long, Lord, before my teenager starts making good choices again? How long before my granddaughter returns to you in obedience and faith? How long, Lord, before you make work easier? It’s so hard! How long, Lord, before you call me home? I’ve lost so much; so much has been taken away. Why not now? Why not yesterday? How long?”

We pray for relief, but often, God would have us wait.

At this time of the year it’s also a tough wait for the little children. These four weeks measured by those four candles are the longest of the year. That’s okay. They get a taste of some much more serious waiting to come. They learn patience, and in this world broken by sin, patience will serve them well.

God works good out of our trials as well. He uses them to teach us patience. He uses them to teach us something about the faith. In fact, without trials, our faith would languish and grow cold. Without troubles, our faith might disappear altogether. It’s so much easier to pray, isn’t it, when you’re in trouble. It’s so much easier to trust in the Lord when you’ve exhausted your own resources. And so we wait. We wait for many things, but over all this we wait for the Lord. We wait for him to stir up his power and come.

Advent waiting is not a passive waiting. It’s not a time when we are “waiting it out,” sitting around whiling away the days and weeks and years of our lives. We are not killing time. No, Advent waiting is living into that future, working for the kingdom, making a difference in the world around us, serving our neighbors. Advent waiting is active waiting, confident waiting, hopeful waiting.

A pastor in Manhattan told his congregation, “I don’t want this place to be an institution for those interested in things religious. I want it to irrigate the community with hope.” I love that image. “Irrigating the community with hope.” While we wait, we work and serve and share God’s grace in Jesus and give them the hope we have in Christ.

Finally, God alone knows the day and the hour when the trumpet will sound and the heavens will be torn apart and the Lord and his angels come. He alone knows when That Day will be, and, in a sense, he too is waiting for it. His is also an active waiting. He’s not killing time. He is at work in the world, irrigating it with hope.

But he comes into human history in ways we never seem to expect. We expect the trumpet blast and the raw, irresistible power. We don’t expect a vulnerable infant lying in a manger. We expect the throne and the royal garments, not the thorns and the whipping and the mocking. God came to us as a man dragging his cross to Golgotha. No one expected that, and no one expected God to do what he did for us there, to suffer for our sin and die our death in order to release us from captivity to sin and death. What we always expect from God is irresistible power. What we receive is grace and mercy . . . in lowly water which gives us life, in bits of bread and sips of wine which gives us forgiveness, in ordinary voices, fallible voices which gives us *his* Word.

Still, we wait for the day when we stand before him face to face. And we pray that he stir up his power and usher in That Day. There's no need to fear that day. He has died for you. He has redeemed you. He has washed you with his blood. He loves you as his own dear child. So you don't need to fear that day. In fact, we yearn for it. "How long, O Lord? How long?" we ask. We plead for it, "Come Lord Jesus. Come quickly."

Time always goes by faster you're doing something. So while we wait, we work, irrigating the community with hope. Amen!