

Waiting is not a strong suit for many of us, whether it be waiting on a light to change, the computer to boot up or the cable repair man to arrive, much less the doctor's lab report to come back, the job opportunity to open, the report card to come in the mail or the pregnancy test to show positive, waiting is really hard work.

I consider myself to generally be a very patient person, but I am not a particularly good waiter. I find myself fidgeting and wondering if I'm in the right place at the right time, even when I know that I am, or wondering if there is something I should be doing instead of just waiting, and I know I am not alone in this. I recently spent 6 hours in an airport after a flight I was supposed to be on was "delayed," I found myself rather anxiously walking around the terminal trying to figure out if there was some way I could get home sooner, even when I knew there was not. It was too far to walk and I cannot fly a commercial airliner.

I know I am not alone when I say, we have become an impatient people, dependent on instantaneous response and immediate gratification. I have gotten text messages from people asking why I haven't responded to the emails they've just sent, and I'm sure you are aware that young people aren't even using email anymore because it is too slow. In a million different ways we have become a people who have lost the art, or the patience, to wait, on anything.

Yet as we read through the narrative of Scripture we are made aware that waiting goes hand in hand with living the life of faith, which means when we find ourselves having to wait we are in some very good company.

We have been looking together at the Abraham and Sarah story, and in Genesis 12 we listen in as God calls them to leave the land of Haran and journey to a new land- a promised land - that God will show them. The basis of that command to "go" was a three-fold promise of God's blessing: the promise of land, the promise of off-spring as numerous as the dust on ground and the stars in the sky, and the promise of blessing, "*I will make your name great and through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed,*" says the Lord.

All of that sounds absolutely wonderful, but there is one problem, two really: first, Sarah is barren and second, Abraham is 75 years old. So in a sense we hear them saying, "OK, Lord, let's get on with this. Time's a wastin.'" We know two couples who have recently gotten Labradoodle puppies. One couple is in their early 60s and the other in their early 80s, and both have said, "We're too old for this!" and that is for getting a dog, much less for reserving a bed in the maternity ward. Yet on this promise of God alone, Abraham and Sarah pick up and move.

We spoke last week of the two-fold nature, or the dual action, of the call of God: God's promise and the human response, both are absolutely necessary, but there is a third dimension to God's call that is introduced here – the seeming "non-action" of waiting. Waiting is that interim period between the giving of God's promise and its fulfillment, and we know about life in the interim.

"How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?" This is the cry of the Psalmist and surely it was Abraham and Sarah's as well, and we will confess it has been our cry, too. There is an honesty about the Psalms that would be very good for us to understand and experience in our own walk of faith and prayer life. The Psalmist doesn't sanitize his thoughts before he lays them out before the Lord, and we needn't either. He doesn't try to make himself look good or righteous or pious by only saying the things he thinks the Lord would like to hear. Instead he tells it like it is. Four times in this six verse psalm we hear him say, "*How long?*" We, too, know that cry of the heart as we wait for God to answer our prayers, perhaps not the "looking for the parking space" prayers, but the prayers that arise out of our greatest needs and fears and anxieties. We know the sense of urgency, even desperation, when we pray, "Lord, give me patience and I want it NOW!"

As we look closely at this Psalm 13 we see that it is a "lament" – a cry of sorrow and grief and angst. Over 1/3 of the Psalms are laments as the Psalmist lifts his concerns about the issues which face him or his community, personally or collectively. Here the Psalmist speaks of his enemies, but often he cries out in the pain of sickness and disease, asking for deliverance and healing. In this the Psalms are such helpful guides to our prayer life because we can simply insert our own concerns in to those expressed by the Psalmist, so the Psalms become something like an "add your name here" template. Yet underlying each of these spoken concerns about sickness or enemies or death is a much greater concern that we can understand, as well. As the time of the Psalmist's waiting lengthens he cries out, "*How long, Lord? Will*

you forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" The real crisis here is not physical, it is spiritual. The Psalmist's greatest fear is that he has been forgotten or abandoned by God, and he seems to be saying, "I can handle anything, but not that." And we have experienced that cry, as well.

So often when we have a long standing prayer, for a loved one, a broken relationship, or a chronic condition, that seems to go unanswered, we get to the point of asking, "How long? Why doesn't God answer my prayer? Is He ever going to answer? Is He even listening? Does He even care? Is God really faithful? Is God really God?"

Those feelings are natural and those questions are honest, particularly when we want answers and we want them NOW! What is God waiting for? From the human perspective, which of course is the only one we've got to work from, it seems like the problem all lies with God and His "in-activity," when perhaps the problem is really ours, as well.

In the New Testament letter of James, we read, "*You do not have because you do not ask.*" (Well, we know we've been asking.) Then he goes on to say, "*You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly in order to spend what you get on your own pleasures.*" (4:2-3) That may sound like a harsh teaching, but it rings true. Listen sometime to your own prayers. We have a tendency to pray for outcomes more than we pray to God. Many of our prayers end up sounding like a grocery list, "OK, Lord, I want this and that and that." And then when we get those things we say, "God is good," but when we don't, or when the answer doesn't come in the way we want or as quickly as we want, we call God into question and begin to wonder whether God is really hearing our prayers, or even if God is good.

Friends, God is good whether we get the answers we want or not. At issue here is that we need to learn to pray "TO" God, not just "FOR" outcomes, and this is what the Psalmist models for us in the laments. The typical psalm of lament follows a pattern which begins with an **address to God**: something like, "O God, hear my prayer," followed by a **complaint**: "this is the issue I am faced with." It proceeds to a **confession of trust** which typically includes a "but" or a "nevertheless," "nevertheless, still, I will trust You," followed by a **petition**: "So, this is what I want you to do about it," ending with a **vow of praise and thanksgiving**: "I trust You, O God, that You have heard my cry."

It is between those last two movements in the Psalm, between the petition and the vow of praise, that we are introduced to the concept of waiting...on God. It is not that we can't tell God what we want or what we need, of course we should, but ultimately our prayers should be more about God than they are about the answers we expect to receive. It is very unlikely that all of the Psalmist's questions were answered and all of his concerns resolved in the pause between verses 4 and 5. Rather, after the Psalmist makes his petitions known, he expresses his confidence in the present that God will give answer in the future, and he is willing to wait for it, because he trusts in God's faithfulness. Rather than turning his back on God because he hasn't gotten his answer yet, the Psalmist is investing more deeply in his relationship with God, trusting more fully, waiting more patiently, not just for the answers he wants, but because he knows that God is God and that God is good. His trust is not just in the promise, but in the Promise-Maker; not just in the answer, but in the Answer-Giver.

I realize that most of the time when I feel anxious or impatient, it is because I am out of control, and I confess that I like to be in control, or at least I like to think that I am in control; but the reality is, I am not in control at all, not of my life, much less of the world around me, I never have been and I never will be, but the life of faith teaches us that God is, and that God has loving intentions toward us. So, the first step in the life of faith is always surrender, learning to let go, and as hard as that is for many of us, it is comforting to know that we surrender to One who loves us unconditionally, and curiously we surrender things over which we really had no control in the first place. So the life of faith all comes down to trust: in God, in His purpose, His timing, His way, not our own, and that requires waiting.

We are all familiar with the beautiful prophecy of Isaiah when he writes, "*The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but 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.*" We love the thought of soaring on wings like eagles and confess that we want that kind of strength and endurance, but the problem is we have lost the ability, or the willingness, to wait for it; "those who wait upon the Lord." Why is waiting such an essential ingredient in the life of faith? Because when we wait we are acknowledging that the things which need doing in our lives and in our world, the really important things, are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own efforts, some other empowerment is needed, so as people of faith we are instructed to wait and watch and pray for God to act in ways we cannot.

Abraham was 75 years old when he heard God's promise of blessing – land, off-spring and greatness – all great ideas, but completely and utterly beyond human reach. This was a helpless, hopeless situation and there wasn't a thing they could do about it, except to wait and trust that God was God, that God was good and that God would be faithful to His promises.

So they waited, 25 years, they waited. Imagine that, it may seem like only 9 chapters to us, but it was 25 years for them before the suspended chord was resolved, and the Lord appeared to them in the middle of the desert (not a coincidence) saying, "The time has come. Sarah's going to have a baby!" How does one respond to such a truly unbelievable announcement? They laughed.

Frederick Buechner writes, "Quantitatively speaking, you don't find much laughter in the Bible, but qualitatively, there's nothing quite like it to be found anywhere else. There are a couple of chapters in Genesis that positively shake with it. Sarah was never going to see ninety again, and Abraham had already hit one hundred, and when the angel told them that the stork was on his way at last, they both of them almost collapsed. Abraham laughed "till he fell on his face" (17:17) and Sarah stood cackling behind the tent door so that the angel wouldn't think she was being rude as the tears streamed down her cheeks. When the baby finally came they even called him "Laughter," which is what Isaac means in Hebrew, because obviously no other name would do...Sarah and Abraham had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old age pension for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough."

Friends, inextricably woven into the call of God and the response of faith is the inevitability of waiting, and the essence of waiting is trust; trust not that we will get exactly what we ask for, but that God is God and that God is good and that God is always faithful to His promises. So, when we wait, in faith, despite all of its pains and doubts and questions, we are doing nothing more and nothing less than staking our hope on the assurance that God is doing something in our lives and in our world that is beyond our abilities to accomplish solely by our own efforts. This is the life of faith: learning to wait, on God.

Psalms 13:1-6 (NRSV)

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Genesis 21:1-7 (NRSV)

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."

And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."