

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 7, 2014**

**WHILE YOU ARE WAITING**

**Psalm 130:1-8**

Have you ever gotten stuck in an elevator? Whether yes or no, I hope what happened to an up-in-years nun never happens to you. She was trapped inside a broken elevator in the convent for four nights and three days before being rescued. When it happened, she was all alone in the convent. No one else was there. When the elevator got stuck, she tried pushing the inside door of the elevator open, but the power went out. She had her cell phone with her – even nuns have cell phones these days – but she couldn't get a signal inside the elevator. Providentially, she had brought a bag into the elevator containing a jar of water, some celery sticks, and a few cough drops.

At first, she thought to herself: *“This can't happen!”* That is a normal human reaction, isn't it? *No! I don't have time for this. Why did this have to happen to me?* After a while, though, realizing there was nothing she could do but wait, she decided to turn the elevator into a personal prayer retreat. “It was either panic or pray,” she said later. Confident that she would be rescued – eventually – she actually began to view the experience as a “gift.” She said: “I believe that God's presence was my strength and my joy – really. I felt God's presence almost immediately. I felt like He provided the opportunity for a closer relationship.”

This is an extraordinary example of waiting with grace, isn't it? To wait with grace, as Ben Patterson writes in his book *Waiting*, requires humility and hope (Patterson, 12). “Patience,” he says, “is a rare and lovely flower that grows only in the soil of humility and hope. Humility makes patience possible because it shows us our proper place in the universe” (167).

It shows us, for example, that God is God and we are not. It shows us that we are not the center of the universe. God is. We may forget that sometimes. It shows us that we are not in control, and if we think we are in control, we are only fooling ourselves. It reminds us that God is in charge, that He is “the blessed Controller of all things” (Ruth Myers, *31 Days of Praise*); that He is sovereign, and we are His subjects. It shows us that God is our all-knowing, all-seeing, all-wise, all-loving heavenly Father and we are His children, dependent on Him at every moment for His protection, provision, and loving care. In this way, humility helps us to wait both in the immediacy of daily life as we wait, for example, for a traffic light to change when we're in a hurry, or for a repairman to come, and in the bigger things of life – things like chronic pain, or suffering, or unfulfilled dreams, or heartache, or the longing for an opportunity to prove yourself in some kind of job or ministry.

John Calvin, our forefather in the Reformed faith, preached 159 sermons from the Old Testament Book of Job. That is three full years' worth of Sundays. He concluded each sermon with these words, or words to this effect: “Now we shall present ourselves before the face of God and bow in humble reverence” (Patterson, 58). In your present circumstances, or at some point in your life, you may wonder why in the world you are waiting or suffering as you are. Though the reason(s) may elude us, we can say this much: The response God seeks

from you and me while we wait is *humble reverence*. Without it, as Patterson says, “we simply cannot wait in peace and with faith” (59).

The other essential ingredient for waiting with grace is hope. “Hope,” writes Patterson, “makes patience possible because it gives us the confidence that our wait is not in vain.” *Not in vain*. This hope is not a form of wishful thinking. This hope is built on a sure foundation. It is built on the rock-solid foundation of God’s Word. It is rooted in the character of God and His promises to us. This kind of hope trusts that God’s love and redemptive purposes will never fail. “It exalts,” Patterson says, “in the knowledge that, in the delays of life, He knows exactly what He is doing. If He moves quickly, it is for our good; if He moves slowly” – forcing us to wait – “it is for our good” (168).

Mary Sue and I have gone through times of waiting for God in our years of married life. As many of you know, I graduated from seminary in 1983 and was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) shortly after. I knew there were problems with the PCUSA. Serious problems. But I thought God might use me, along with a cadre of others, as an instrument for spiritual revival, for biblical and theological renewal in the denomination. It didn’t take many years before I came to see the enormity of entrenched opposition that existed across the PCUSA to the kind of change for which I felt called to work. I was greatly blessed in those years through my involvement with other like-minded followers of Christ in organizations such as Presbyterians for Renewal and, especially, Presbyterians Pro-Life, both of which were committed to spiritual renewal and the promotion of biblical faithfulness in the PCUSA. I was part of a team from across the country at three different PCUSA General Assemblies seeking to present a biblical pro-life witness to a denomination whose leaders at the national level and in many of its presbyteries were increasingly turning away from the authoritative message of the Bible.

We became more concerned, more discouraged, and more uncomfortable with each passing year. It was taking an emotional and spiritual toll on Mary Sue and me to be in a denomination we could not in good conscience support for a number of reasons. In June of 1992, when we had been at our church in Altoona, PA for six years, I met my friend Brett Flenniken at Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh for a Pirates game. Brett had driven from Cleveland (where he lived), and I from Altoona. We were both big Pirates fans, and still are. During the game, I remember saying to Brett: “It’s time for me to go” – meaning, it’s time for me, time for Mary Sue and me and our family, to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA). I think it was the first time I had actually spoken the words.

I have to say that in the midst of our discouragement, discomfort, and the ongoing challenge to make a positive difference in the denomination, our presbytery, and our congregation, God showed us the sweetness of His grace and continued to prove His faithfulness. He had already blessed us with two precious daughters, Erin and Lindsay. Then, right in the midst of this stressful season of feeling out of place in the PCUSA, the Lord gave us our son, Nate (or Nathan or Nathaniel), who, like his older sisters, brought a new dimension of joy (as well as tiredness) to our lives. That was 22 years ago.

Mary Sue and I both believed it was time to find a new denominational home. While we considered other possibilities, we found ourselves particularly drawn to the EPC. So I began to look for pastoral opportunities in the EPC. And we waited for the Lord to open the door of His choosing for us.

Our wait would last almost five years before the Lord led us here to Faith in 1997. We thought we were ready to go in 1992. But God had a different plan. There was work He still wanted us to do in Altoona. There was work He still wanted to do in us. In that waiting time, God allowed us to go deeper in relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Altoona. God also used that time to teach Mary Sue and me to pray together as husband and wife in a deeper and more consistent way than ever before.

It was not easy for us to persevere without becoming discouraged at times during those five years of waiting. At times we wondered: “How long, O Lord?” I’m sure we didn’t always wait with grace. But God used that time of waiting to teach us to trust in Him with our whole hearts and to lean not on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). In the words of the old Andrae Crouch song:

Through it all, through it all  
I’ve learned to trust in Jesus  
I’ve learned to trust in God.

In that waiting time there were lessons God wanted to teach us – me, especially – in order to prepare us for what He had in store for us in the next season of our lives. God refined us in the furnace of waiting. He is still refining us. And you, too, in the details of your life.

Maybe you’ve had an experience of waiting similar to ours. Maybe you’re in God’s “waiting room” right now. You may be a lot better at waiting than I am. You may have learned to wait with grace, with humility and hope. You may have learned how to take it in stride and not lose heart when you or your plans are delayed. Or, like me, you may find waiting – certain kinds of waiting, at least – one of the hardest things about life in this world.

“In the delays of life,” says Patterson, “God knows exactly what He is doing.” You can wait with hope only if you believe this. But there is more to waiting with hope. “Hope,” Patterson continues, “invites us to look at our waitings from the grand perspective of God’s eternal purposes. In fact, to be a believer is, by definition, to be one who waits. When Jesus won His victory over sin and death” in His atoning death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, “He ascended into heaven, promising one day to return. We (who are followers of Jesus) wait for that return, poised between the times . . . . We look back to His victory and strain forward to see its consummation” at His second coming (169).

The writer of Psalm 130 exhibits both humility and hope in his waiting. We noted last Sunday the psalmist’s cry to the Lord for mercy “out of the depths” of the crushing burden of his guilt before God (Psalm 130:1-2). Seeing the depths of his sinfulness, he was humbled and knew he was without hope for salvation and forgiveness and peace with God, except in

God's sovereign mercy. We also took note of the psalmist's affirmation of faith in verses 3 and 4, his confident declaration that God is a merciful God, with whom there is forgiveness.

What the psalmist says next in verses 5 and 6 is an example of waiting with humility and hope:

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in His word I put my hope.  
My soul waits for the Lord  
more than watchmen wait for the morning,  
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

“Watchmen” were men on night-time guard duty, whose job was to keep vigilant watch over the city, to make sure no sudden attack threatened the safety of the sleeping populace. After a long night of being on the alert, these watchmen eagerly awaited the dawn, because it meant they would be relieved of duty. Like the watchmen, the psalmist waits with eagerness, with hope-filled anticipation, for God to fulfill His promise of salvation and all the promises of His Word.

Three times he declares his resolve to “wait for the Lord.” This waiting is not just sitting there doing nothing as time passes. It is *active waiting*, which means recognizing that there is something God wants you to do in your present circumstances while you wait for whatever it is that you are waiting for. What this active waiting involves for the psalmist is evident in the second part of verse 5, where he says: “In His word I put my hope.”

Why put his hope in God's Word? Why put *your* hope in His Word? Because God's Word is trustworthy and true. His promises are worthy of our trust. You can take God at His word and trust His promises because God Himself is trustworthy. You can trust God's character. He is not fickle. He is not out to trick you or deceive you or take advantage of you. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Since God is faithful and always keeps His word, you can hold on and keep on holding on to the hope you have in Him (Hebrews 10:23).

Because of who God is, because of what God has done and will do, the psalmist urged God's covenant people, Israel, to put their hope in the LORD (130:7). In the same way, the Holy Spirit urges us today to put our hope in the LORD in the midst of whatever kind of waiting or testing or suffering we may be undergoing.

Whatever it may be in your life, don't waste it. God has something to teach you while you wait. He has something for you to do while you wait. Your waiting is part of your sanctification – the process by which God is refining you and cultivating a Christ-like character in you. Character is forged, and faith is deepened, in delay. While you wait, God is preparing you for something yet to come.

Waiting is hard. But God ordains it and uses it for good – for our good, for His good and gracious purposes in our lives, and for His glory.

Learn to wait for the Lord, dear friends. Put your hope in Him. Wait for Him in prayer. Wait for Him in faith. Wait for Him with humility and hope. As David says in Psalm 27:14: “Be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”

Yes, Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.