

WHEN IT'S TIME TO WAIT

Luke 2:19-35

December 30, 2001

Dr. J. Howard Olds

It has been reported that the average American in a lifetime will spend five years waiting in line, two years returning telephone calls, eight months opening junk mail, and six months staring at traffic lights. In spite of all our modern technology, the first words we often see on the computer screen is "please wait". Anyone who makes a telephone call these days is likely to be put on hold long before they hear a human being on the other end of the phone.

Some of you got to church today in a "holding" state of mind. You are waiting for a test result, a word about a job interview, for your kids to come, or maybe to go. To wait or not to wait, that is not the question. The question is how will we wait? What purpose and meaning will we find in these in-between times?

There is a minor character in the Christian drama named Simeon. We do not know a lot about Simeon. Everything there is to know about him in the Bible is recorded in Luke chapter 2:25-35. He was a righteous and devout priest who spent his life waiting for the consolation of Israel. He lived and survived by the constant hope that he would not die until he could see the Messiah. Simeon was an expert at waiting. On this in-between Sunday, maybe we can find a clue about how we can wait, too.

SIMEON WAITED WITH PURPOSE

The ultimate dream of his life was that someday, before he died, he would see the Messiah face-to-face. Stephen Covey, in the immensely popular book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says the second habit we ought to embrace is to *always begin with the end in mind*. Many of you use that in business or in your personal lives. Always begin with the end in mind. Covey went on to say that everything is created twice. The first creation is always the creation that we have in our mind.

You builders go out to build a building, but before you build it, you dream about it. Next, you put it on paper. Then, you take a hammer and a nail to start construction. The building was first created in the mind.

A woman dreams of opening a business. Before she opens the door she defines what she hopes to accomplish, whom she hopes to serve and what niche in the market she might find. After she has done that, then, she is ready to say, "Come on in."

The best thing that a person can do, continues Covey, is to write a personal mission statement. Articulate in a simple sentence why you are here on earth and what you hope to accomplish in a lifetime. Then, when you fulfill that purpose,

you will know your reason for being has been fulfilled.

The personal mission statement of Bill Gates was, “a computer to be on every desk in every home.” For Simeon it was “seeing the Messiah before I die.” That was his singular reason to live— “To see the Messiah before I die.” What is your personal mission statement? What is your reason for living? What do you hope to accomplish? What is the singular thing that will be your mark on the face of the earth? What is your reason for being?

You see, when your purpose is great, you will be willing to wait. If you have not figured out why you are here, *if you have no reason to be born, save to consume the corn and eat the fish, and leave behind a dirty dish*, you are going to be bored with these in-between times in life. If you know why you are here, if you have a purpose for living, a reason for your existence, then, you are willing to wait for it.

Michelangelo, so the story goes, was once seen by friends pushing a heavy rock through the town square. Some of his friends inquired, “Michael, why are you laboring so over that rock?” Michelangelo replied, “There is an angel in this rock waiting to come out.” You see, he had a reason for living.

For four hundred years there had been no word from the Lord. Simeon had lived through the Roman invasion and Pompey’s massacre of the priests. He had seen the holy of holies destroyed. He had watched hope sag like a wet rag. Through it all, he hung on to a revelation. He hung on to hope. He hung on to a promise. **I will not die before I see the Messiah.** That was reason enough to be alive.

Hope does that for us. Hope sees the invisible. Hope feels the intangible. Hope achieves the impossible. People of hope have discovered the vast difference between waiting and marking time. Have you discovered the difference? Do you know the difference between just taking up space on earth and living for a great spiritual ideal? Simeon waited with purpose and you can, too.

SIMEON WAITED WITH PATIENCE

When Estée□ Lauder started her perfume business she had to persuade a cosmetic buyer to place her product in stores. So at 9:00 a.m. one morning Ms. Lauder walked into the American Merchandising Corporation and asked to see Marie Watson, a cosmetic buyer. The receptionist informed Ms. Lauder that Ms. Watson was busy and she would need to come back another day. “I’ll wait,” replied Ms. Lauder. At lunch time Ms. Lauder was informed that Ms. Watson was still busy. “I’ll wait a little longer,” replied Ms. Lauder. At 5:15 p.m. Ms. Watson walked out of her office and said to Ms. Lauder, “Well, come in, such patience must be rewarded.” The rest, as they say, is history.

It was Longfellow who said, “All things come round to those who are willing to wait.” How are you at waiting? I like to say that patience is the ability to idle your motor when you feel like stripping your gears. That is my definition of patience. When the Lord handed out patience, I was in the other line. I am a very

impatient person. When I come to a traffic light that is turning from yellow to red, I am sure I can make it through every time. Sandy says it is red. I'm convinced it is just orange. Statistics say that the running of red lights costs us seven billion dollars a year and saves us an average of fifty seconds. How are you at patience?

One of the great lessons of patience I learned in cancer treatment a few years ago. I discovered why people of the medical profession call consumers "patients". All you do is wait, and wait, and wait. I remember waiting for hours to see my oncologist one day. Finally getting in to see her, I sat down and said, "By some spiritual design has God appointed you to try to teach me patience?" She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I have been waiting for two hours to see you. People come to see me, wait ten minutes, and if I'm not there they write me a nasty note, leave it under my door and go on their way." She says, "Well, Howard, maybe people need to see me a lot worse than they need to see you."

I discovered something in that period that has changed my life. I discovered either you can take those waiting moments and complain about them or you can transform them into something spiritual. I started doing something in waiting rooms that I had never done before. I started praying for people when their names were called. I called them by name in prayer. I would observe their relatives and friends and their long faces of worry as they waited. I would offer a prayer for them, too. What do you do with your time of waiting? Have you learned a great purpose and usefulness for your patience? You see, Simeon watched and waited for a lifetime. Here, we get a hint of how he did it. He went to the temple, kept the rituals, observed the law.

A family member heard the alarm clock and pulled the covers over his head one Sunday morning and said, "I'm not going to church today." The voice from across the room said, "You are going to church today and I'll give you three good reasons why. You are six feet tall, you are fifty years old, and you are the pastor. You are paid to go to church." I suppose all of us have gotten up a few times in our life and said, "I'm just not going back to life tomorrow. It is not quite worth it. I'm tired of the same old thing over and over again."

It is one thing to be a part of a community on its high and holy days. It is another thing to be in the routines and the daily struggles. When you read the struggles of Simeon you discover he was there in the routines of time. He began to discover that rituals are not restrictive and routines have meaning. In the normal course of an ordinary day commitments are made, love is spoken, gratitude is expressed, and life is lived. If you want to be at the right place at the right time, when the Messiah shows up, you are there all the time. That makes all the difference. Simeon waited with patience to see the Messiah.

SIMEON WAITED WITH POWER

Simeon waited with the power of the Holy Spirit. V. 25 *The Holy Spirit was upon him.* V.26 *It was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit.* V. 27 *Moved by the Spirit,*

he went to the temple. Simeon did not possess the Spirit, he was possessed by the Spirit. That makes a lot of difference in life. Our task is not to get God to fit in our box and on our schedule. The task of life is to embrace God's time and see it from God's perspective. The task in life is not to get God squeezed into our mold, but find ourselves surrendering to the direction and the call of the Almighty in His timeframe. In God's time, He makes all things beautiful.

The Bible has two words for time in the New Testament. One is *Chronos*, from which we get the word chronology or calendar. Chronos time is drudgery time, time measured by the ticking of the clock. Each second is exactly like the one before it. Chronos time is the picture of a convict in a prison cell, waiting, marking off the calendar for the day of his release. Chronos time is the picture of a person with insomnia unable to sleep. All they can hear is the relentless ticking of the clock in the middle of the night when it seems as if it takes eternity for an hour to pass. Chronos time is a church member who was dragged to church today and is saying somewhere deep in your heart, "Is he ever going to finish? Is this sermon ever going to be over?" That is Chronos time.

There is another word in the Bible for time. That word is *Kairos*. It is expectant time. Kairos time is a young mother nine months pregnant, waiting any day to deliver. Kairos time is my two and a half year old grandson saying, "Poppy, can we open the presents, yet?" Kairos time is Martin Luther and John Wesley restless with a Church that has lost its mission, saying some things have got to change. In a moment like that, in a rich, special, significant, dramatic moment, God became a human being.

Galatians 4:4 says, *in the fullness of time, God sent His Son, born of a woman.* Have you ever pondered how **right** the time was when our Lord touched down on earth? In a time like that,— when ten thousand Roman laborers had built a vast system of roads, some of which are still in use today. In a time when Greek language and culture had given cohesion to a once divided world. In a time when old, mythical gods were losing their hold in the hearts and minds of people who were hungry for something new. In a time when morals were so polluted by permissiveness that the best of spirits everywhere were battling for something better. In a time like that—in the fullness of time. In God's time, Christ was born. Your task and my task in life is not to get God to fit our agenda, but to make our agenda God's agenda. For *in God's time all things become beautiful.* As Deitrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Everything has its time, and the main thing is that we keep step with God and do not keep pressing on a few steps ahead or lag a few behind."

Old Simeon has waited for a lifetime. In God's moment, in that Kairos time, when the time is "just right," there comes a little peasant girl and a carpenter to the temple to fulfill the ritual of their Jewish heritage. As they come toward the altar, the old, feeble priest gets a gleam in his eye. The One for *which I have waited for eternity is now before me.* In God's time. In God's time.

Somebody said life is like gardening, or baking, or fishing, or learning to fly. It is just impossible to get around the hours.

Many of us have learned to live on a faithful promise of Isaiah:
*those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings as eagles;
they shall run and not grow weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

That is my prayer for you on the eve of a brand new year.
Amen.

