The Waiting Game
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Waiting! Life is full of waiting. Whether it's waiting for an appointment, waiting in line, waiting in traffic, waiting for finals, waiting for grades, waiting for liberty, waiting for leave, waiting on friends or family, waiting is an inescapable part of life.

When I look back over the course of my own life, it seems I have always been waiting. When I was in elementary school, I couldn't wait for high school. When I was in high school, I couldn't wait for college. When I was in college, I couldn't wait to graduate and make my way out in the world. I couldn't wait to get married. We couldn't wait to have kids. I couldn't wait to enter the Navy and every couple of years I can't wait to see where the Detailer will send me next. I couldn't wait for my kids to grow up, get married, and have kids of their own so I could become a grandpa! And as most of you know, that day arrived not long ago with the birth of Pollyanna.

No, I couldn't wait…but I had to wait in every instance just described. I had to wait 14 years before entering high school, 4 more before graduation, 4 more beyond that before completing college, and 4 more before finishing seminary. I had to wait 22 years before I married my wonderful wife and a few years after that for each of the kids to be born. I had to wait 33 years before God called me into the Navy, and 52 years before becoming a grandpa.

No, I couldn't wait but I had to wait because waiting is a part of life. And the way we wait matters. If we wait well then we will live well. If we wait badly then we will live poorly. For our lives are shaped by the way we wait.

For example, the first year I worked in the Pentagon, I drove to the office every day. The mornings weren't too bad because I left early enough every morning to avoid the worst of the traffic but the evenings were always a mess. I could never leave the office early and it didn't matter how late I left, the traffic was always a snarl. It usually took 50-60 minutes to travel the 13 miles to my home and by the time I got home I was almost always stressed and irritable.

After a year of that, I decided to use the bus. The morning commute was a little longer but the evening commute was cut in half and I passed each leg of the journey with my Bible or a good book cradled in hand. And over time I began to relish the daily commute. I looked forward to the latest book, learned a lot from my reading, grew in spirit, and arrived home each night refreshed and ready to spend time with my family.

Yes, if we wait well then we'll live well. If we wait badly then we'll live poorly. For our lives are shaped by the way we wait. And good waiting produces good results. In one of his sermons Pastor Stephen Pietsch writes the following:

“Recently I had the opportunity to open and consume a special bottle of red wine. It’s a bottle that I have been cellaring for 14 years. When we first tasted this wine at the winery it was full of promise. It had all the makings of a wonderful wine, though in a raw and undeveloped state. Back then it was completely unsuitable for drinking straight away. I read my Penguin wine guide and discovered that the experts suggested this year…was the year it should be opened. So we waited and waited for 14 years. And finally last Wednesday we drew the cork. And the wine had changed – it was rich and smooth and complex and wonderful. The potential it had…had come to fullness. It was fantastic.”[i]

That’s what happens to us when we wait well. We mature. Our lives become rich and smooth and complex and wonderful. Our potential ripens and comes to fullness. Good waiting produces good results.

But what are we waiting for and how should we wait for its coming? Well I suppose we’re waiting for many things and the lists of those things are as varied as we are. But as Christians we’re mainly waiting for Jesus Christ to come again. And Advent reminds us of this waiting.

You see the word “Advent” means “coming.” And Advent is a season that celebrates the threefold comings of Jesus Christ: his first coming as a babe in Bethlehem, his current coming through the Spirit, and his second coming at the end of time. And Advent reminds us that we spend much of our time waiting for Jesus to come again – either waiting for him to appear in the present with help and healing in his hands or waiting for him to come again and set things right at the end of time.

First Thessalonians was written to a waiting congregation. They were waiting for Jesus to reappear. I believe there may be more written in 1 Thessalonians about the second coming of Jesus Christ than in any other of Paul’s epistles. It’s a theme he picks up again in 2 Thessalonians.

So why were the Thessalonians so eager for Jesus to reappear? Well they wanted him to deliver them from life’s trials and troubles. You see, they were a suffering church – suffering through a time of terrible persecution. (See 1 Thessalonians 2:14 & 3:1-4) And according to 1 Thessalonians 4:13, many of their friends had perished, either in that persecution, or from sickness, old age, or other factors. So they wanted Christ to come again with help and healing in his hands. They wanted him to come again and set things right, both in their life and in the world about them. And who among us doesn’t?

Let’s face it; our world is a mess: ISIS in the Middle East; Ebola in Africa; racial tensions in the United States; poverty, hunger, and disease in the third world; conflicts with Russia; tensions with China, North Korea and Iran; the glue that holds the world together is getting a little loose.

And the glue that holds your life together may be getting a little loose too. Maybe you're a Midshipmen struggling with your grades, your weight, your physical fitness. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by the stresses of life. Maybe you're lonely, anxious, depressed or angry. Maybe you feel rejected. Maybe you're the victim of abuse or suffer an addiction. Maybe you're having marital difficulties, relational difficulties, financial difficulties, or problems with your kids. Maybe you or a loved one has a serious sickness. Maybe someone you love is about to die. And you want Jesus to come with help and healing in his hands. You want him to come and set things right. You want him to free you from your troubles but he hasn't yet; your troubles continue; and you find yourself in the waiting game just waiting for him to come.

So how should you wait for the coming of Christ – whether his present coming in the here and now or his second coming at the end of time? Remember, how you wait will shape your life. If you wait well then you will live well but if you wait badly then you will live poorly. Good waiting makes a good life.

Well Paul answers this question in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24. This passage follows a lengthy passage where Paul talks about the second coming in very great detail. Then, in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22, Paul tells the Thessalonians how they should pass the time while waiting for Christ to come again. And basically he tells them to do four things. He tells them to be joyful, prayerful, thankful, and faithful.

First, he tells them to be joyful. "Rejoice always," he says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16. Next, he tells them to be prayerful. "Pray without ceasing," he says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Then he tells them to be thankful. "(G)ive thanks in all circumstances," he says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 "for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Finally, in a series of admonitions, he tells them to be faithful – faithful to Christ despite suffering and persecution. "Do not quench the Spirit," he says. "Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22) In other words, be faithful to the Spirit and to the Word; hold fast to the good and avoid the evil.

There it is. That's how we should pass the time while waiting for Christ to come again with help and healing in his hands. We should be joyful, prayerful, thankful, and faithful.

Now all of that is easily said but it isn't always easily done. It isn't always easy to be joyful, prayerful, thankful and faithful when we are suffering as the Thessalonians were. No, it isn't always easy to be joyful, prayerful, thankful and faithful when our backs are against the wall and we're surrounded by thick clouds of deepest darkness or despair. So how do we do it? Where do we find the motivation?

Well we can only pass dark and difficult days joyfully, prayerfully, thankfully, and faithfully if we believe, truly believe, that Christ has come, Christ is coming, and Christ will come again. For if we believe, truly believe, that Christ came to us in Bethlehem,

that he's coming now with help and healing in his hands, and that he'll come again at the end of time to make all things bright and new, then, and only then, will we face dark days joyfully, prayerfully, thankfully, and faithfully. We'll face dark days joyfully, prayerfully, thankfully, and faithfully because we'll know that a brighter day may dawn at any moment and eternal day will surely dawn at the very end of time.

Earlier this week, on a very dark and chilly morning, I was running my usual route around the Yard when I turned a corner and saw Kent Island and the Eastern Shore lying sleepily beneath a sky tinged orange with the harbingers of dawn! For all the world it looked like a summer sunrise was on the way. The view of it lifted my spirit immensely because I hadn't seen such a sky for a very long time. You see, the days are so short and the nights are so long and the clouds are so many this time of year, that I hadn't seen a sky like that for many a morning run. But on that morning, the brightening horizon brightened my spirit and reminded me that the night was nearly over, day was at about to dawn, winter would someday pass and summer would surely come. It was tonic to my soul.

And faith in the coming of Jesus Christ is the best tonic for any soul running in the darkness. Like a sun rise, Christ will surely come to brighten our lives and will come again at the end of time to brighten our world forever! This is our hope and this is the message of Advent.

My friend, how are you waiting for the coming of Jesus? The way you wait will shape your life. It will either make you bitter or better. Are you waiting with grumbling discontent or are you looking with hope for the coming of Christ and waiting joyfully, prayerfully, thankfully and faithfully? Remember, good waiting produces good results. Amen.

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[i] Waiting with Joy by Pastor Stephen Pietsch. Found on December 10, 2014 at: http://www.ringwoodknoxparish.org.au/sermons/2005/2005-12-11.html