

When God Says, “Not Yet”

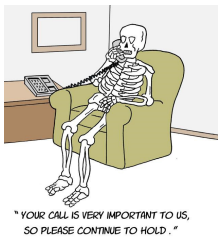
March 5, 2017

II Samuel 3:1-5; II Corinthians 12:6-10

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver

As we begin, let me remind you that we’re spending a good bit of this year listening to the stories of David, the shepherd boy who became Israel’s greatest king. In fact – [pause, walk off the chancel as ‘on hold’ music plays for 15 seconds or so...



Did you know that the average American spends thirteen hours each year waiting on hold for someone in customer service to pick up the stupid telephone? Six months of your life will be spent waiting at a traffic light. That’s easy compared to the two years you can expect to spend waiting in line at the grocery store, the bank, the gas station, or the movie theater...

Waiting... who likes to wait? Isn’t that about the most frustrating part of your day? And these examples, while certainly unpleasant, are only the day-to-day, small-picture, grindingly-irritating things for which we wait.



The time you spend in line at the bank or watching the calendar pages turn as you wait for your tax refund to arrive is frustrating, to be sure, but we can usually comfort ourselves by knowing that the resolution to our concern or the fulfillment of our desires is at least in sight, if not imminent. You know what I mean, right? You're chafed at the fact that the other line is moving faster, but you know that sooner or later the clerk will start scanning your items and you'll be able to take your groceries and head for home. This kind of waiting is a pain in the neck, but it doesn't produce a crisis of faith or lead to long-term angst or depression.

But what about the other things for which we wait in life? The "big" waits? What about the couple who is desperately trying to conceive a child, or the young father who's looking for work? Can you imagine living in a refugee camp, knowing that you're not home, but not sure whether there ever will be a "home" again? Or the single person who longs for the intimacy of marriage, or the person living with cancer who wonders about the length of the remission she's been granted... What about *that* kind of waiting? The kind of uncertainty and hopefulness and despair that can lead you to say "O, please, God, when will it stop... or change... or get better?" The kind of waiting that *can* lead to deep questions about God, and life, and meaning, and eternity? How well do you deal with *that* kind of waiting?

Now, while you think on that, let me ask you to picture this scene in your head. You're on a retreat or a mission trip with a large group. We've all agreed to meet at, say, 8 a.m. to get started on our day. You know how it is... some of us are there at 7:45, eager to get a jump on things. A handful come into the room at 7:58. And, because this is CHUP, let's assume that another half dozen people show up at 8:05. Can you picture

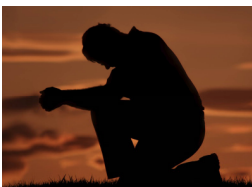
this in your head so far?

How many times is there that one guy who just isn't there by 8:10? We're waiting, and we clarify with each other – "we said 8 o'clock, right?" We get a little passive-aggressive and we start rolling our eyes, or conspicuously checking our watches. We sigh – quite loudly. And you want to send someone into the next room to check on him to make sure that he's aware, but you know he's there. You can hear him whistling a show tune or maybe working away on his laptop. Finally, he strolls into the room, brushing his teeth, and looks up and says, "Oh, hey guys! What's up? Oh – wait – did we say 8??? I was sure it was 9! My bad..."

OK, show of hands... how many of you have been in a situation like that, where you're waiting and waiting and waiting for someone who seems to be pretty clueless and disengaged from the group process?

Now, how many of you have ever been that guy at least once in your life?

The question is... how many times when you've been in the midst of some huge and horrific wait have you felt as though God has been acting that way?



Here you are – you've got some serious business going on. You *need* that job, you are dying of loneliness, you can't stand to see your child struggling with addiction any longer, and you've been praying and praying and praying. You have cried out to God, and it seems as if he's not there, or even worse, as though he's just messing around with something else? You want to scream at all those athletes and poor students, "Will you shut up about that game you've got coming up or that test you didn't study for? God's got more important fish to fry!"

Where is God when you need him?

Where is God while we are waiting, or hoping, or suffering?

Why is it that God sometimes takes so long to get his act together?

Do you remember when we met David? He was just a kid, out minding his own business, taking care of his father's sheep. Through the prophet Samuel, God calls to this boy – who is maybe fifteen years old – and says, "All right, son: stay on the straight and narrow. One day, you're going to be king. Not yet, of course, but one day..." And David shrugs and says, "OK, God, I'll wait..."

And then he goes out and kills Goliath... He moves into Saul's house, and Saul's son Jonathan becomes a best friend. He marries Saul's daughter, and then he gets chased out of Saul's house. His wife is taken from him. He gets chased out of Israel. His friend dies. For fifteen years, give or take, David is on the run. Finally, Saul dies.

This is it! This is what David's been waiting for, right? Now he can be the king! And, in fact, he is anointed king... in the tribe of Judah. The other Israelites are holding out for a relative of Saul's. There's a power struggle and uncertainty and dis-ease for another seven and a half years.

With the benefit of three thousand years' hindsight, we can say, "Wow, God really was faithful to David, wasn't he?" But the reality is that for nearly a quarter of a century, David's primary experience of God was...*not yet*. For David and those around him, year after year was spent asking, "Now?" and hearing "Nope."

I know that nobody here has waited twenty-two years in

the hopes of becoming the rightful king of Israel, but I know that you know the pain of waiting or the frustration of unanswered questions. What do you say when God seems silent? How are you supposed to act when it seems as though God has already checked out?

Let me suggest that in some important ways, David can be a model for us in these situations.

The scripture that you heard a few moments ago from II Samuel summarizes seven and a half years of conflict in a single verse, and then goes on to name the six sons that were born to David during this time. What does that suggest about the way that David was behaving during this time of waiting?

- That is *not* what I meant! -

I'd venture to say that this is one way of saying that David was getting on with his life. He continued to *act* as though the promise was coming true, even if he couldn't see it with his own eyes right now. While this behavior is not necessarily the model for family life that we'd like to see in the church in the 21st century, the reality is that even while David is continuing to wait on God, he is looking toward the future that God has promised him.

The other thing that David did during these years after Saul's death was to continue to seek the Lord. Although it isn't mentioned in the readings we heard this morning, II Samuel chapter 2 relates the fact that David continued to inquire of the Lord with some regularity. In his public as well as his private life, David appealed to the covenant that God had made, even though the terms of that covenant had not all been fully realized.

Furthermore, it would be foolish to ignore the fact that the very experience of waiting in this manner shaped David into the

kind of king that he would become. Of course he behaved differently as a forty-year old king than he would have as a fifteen-year old monarch. Some of what he went through shaped him for that which he was to become.

In the same way, those of us who are waiting, waiting, waiting for something to happen or for something to end are called to continue to walk in the paths of discipleship. We can hold on to what we have and continue to act as though all of God's promises are true even on those days when we have a hard time feeling their truth.

I think that's what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Corinthians. He mentions what he calls his "thorn in the flesh" – some mysterious affliction – that seems to get in the way of his happiness or productivity. We're not sure exactly what this "thorn" was: some scholars have suggested Paul struggled with depression, or epilepsy, or failing eyesight, or recurrent bouts of pain. We can't know what it was, because Paul doesn't tell us. What he *does* tell us, however, is that what God is doing is more important than what Paul is feeling. Paul senses God's presence with him saying, "Look, don't put all your trust in what *you* can do or what *you* hope will happen. Trust that my grace is enough for you. Trust in me to hold you up." Paul does this, and is able to write about finding contentment in Christ.

We are not promised easy answers or short-cut solutions. Those things didn't show up in David's life or in Paul's. It seems to me that the path of faith invites us into all of the messy and sometimes painful places of our lives in the expectation that God will show up at the right time... even if the timing is not what we would wish.

Søren Kierkegaard stressed the importance of the discipline of waiting in faith. He said that many of us are like the student who didn't like math, but needed a good grade in

the course, and so he stole the teacher's answer sheet before the test. His goal, of course, was to memorize all of the right answers and then get a perfect score. Kierkegaard rightly points out that answers like that are not really answers at all. To truly have the answers, we have to work through the problems.¹

Your life and mine are full of problems. Some of them are minor irritants, such as choosing the slow line at the Giant Eagle or getting lost in traffic. Some of them are incredibly difficult to bear, such as the loss of a child or the dimming of hopes that were bright. We will not escape the problems. But with the help of God, we can walk into them knowing that these problems will not overwhelm us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, and with the company of those around us in the body of Christ, we can work it out. We can wait it out. We can hope it out. God's grace was sufficient for David and for Paul. It is enough for you and me as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Quoted in Ben Patterson's *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent* (Intervarsity, 1989) p. 14