

Waiting on Word

In the name the Lamb who was slain, by whose blood we've been ransomed, and who has made us a kingdom and priests to God, dear friends in Christ: I expect that there are a number of four-letter words that you would prefer people not use when addressing you. Some of them I dare not speak from the pulpit. But there's one I can say that I know you hate to hear; and that word is: *wait*.

We just don't like it, do we? We're busy people. Our time is precious. We have places to go and things to do. And being told to wait just doesn't fit into our hectic schedules. It's especially unwelcome when the time period is unspecified, and you don't know how long you're going to have to wait – like when you make a phone call to your insurance company or some other big bureaucratic office. I mean first you have to maneuver your way past all the option menus that say things like “Press one to continue in English” and “If you're calling to make a payment, press two”. If you're like me, you usually have to hang up and go through the series again one or more times because at some point you weren't sure which of the options best described your situation and you mistakenly took the wrong fork in the road and there was no way to back up. Anyway, when at length you make it past all those hurdles, and you arrive at the point when you actually expect to speak to a live human being, it's then the automated voice says “*All of our customer service representatives are currently assisting other clients. Please hold and the next available representative will be with you.*” So, you wait. And you sit there impatiently drumming your fingers to the mildly annoying music provided – it seems – to make your wait seem longer than it really is. A few minutes later you think that maybe someone's picking up; but no, it's just the “please hold” message repeating itself, which it does over and over again every few minutes ... while you hang on ... waiting ... and waiting ... and thinking of all the things you could be doing ... until you're uncomfortably certain that you shouldn't have had that cup of coffee before you dialed. Can I get a witness here?

No, we don't like waiting; but much as we don't like it, it happens that the Lord often has some very good reasons for having us to do so – as two of today's Scripture readings clearly demonstrate. Consider the Gospel lesson. In it we find the disciples waiting for Jesus in Galilee. Recall that the angels who met the women at the tomb on that first Easter morning told them that Jesus had risen. The angels went on to say, “He goes before you into Galilee. There you will see him.” Despite this, we know that the disciples lingered in Jerusalem for at least another week. It may be that they decided to remain for the entire seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which begins on Passover. Certainly, that would have been their custom. And it explains why the disciples are still in Jerusalem when Jesus appears to them the second time when Thomas was with them a week after his first appearance on the evening of Easter.

In any case, as today's account begins, the disciples have (finally) made it to Galilee as they were instructed. And here they are waiting for Jesus. We're not told how long they had to wait. And it's clear that they didn't know when Jesus would show up. They only know that they were told they would see him here. So put yourself in their place. You have just experienced first hand the most significant events in human history. The eternal plan of God's salvation for the lost and dying world has played out right under your nose – and you were a part of it. You had a front row seat to Jesus' ministry. You saw the miracles. You heard him teach. You even helped spread his message – even though you really didn't understand everything as it was unfolding. You had a lot of misconceptions about Jesus and what he was here to do. This was most apparent a few weeks back when Jesus was arrested and crucified. Though he told you it was about to happen, you pretty much refused to hear it. When it did happen, you were

devastated. You were lost. Your world came undone. You spent three seemingly interminable days in grief, shock, and confusion. But then came the surprise of his resurrection, which *shouldn't* have been a surprise; but it was to you. And you were filled with inexpressible joy. And then you began to understand. Jesus opened your mind to the Scriptures. You saw the eternal plan and purpose of God revealed in Jesus his Son. And you understand that you are still a big part of it. The kingdom of God has come to earth and you are one chosen to help lay its foundation. Incredible as it seems, it's true. The hope of the ages has come. The time is upon us. All right then. Let's get it on! What are we waiting for?

Well ... to be precise, we're waiting for Jesus. He's supposed to be here. But a day goes by and nothing. Then another. And another. And who knows how many more? But still no sign of Jesus. "Are you sure we were supposed to meet him *here*? Maybe we got it wrong somehow." "No ... we were definitely told that *this* is the place." "Yeah; but it doesn't make any sense. I mean, if we're going to start building the kingdom of God, shouldn't we start in the capital – in Jerusalem? That's where all the people are. What are we doing here in sleepy, backwater Galilee?" "Nothing. That's what we're doing; nothing at all." "Well, don't you think we should be doing *something*? This sitting around waiting is driving me nuts." "Well, I don't know about the rest of you guys; but I'm going fishing. That's one thing I know how to do." "Hang on, Peter, we're coming with you."

Interesting. Now, let's be clear about this: there's nothing wrong with going fishing, especially if you happen to be a fisherman. And that's what most of these guys used to be. The problem, however, is that Jesus called these men to be his *disciples*. He told them that from now on they'll be catching men. And they left their nets and their boats behind and they followed him. Now, when things seem to be taking too long to develop the way they think they should, they revert to their old way of doing business. Then at least they'll feel that they're doing something productive.

And the same thing happens in the church today. I mean here we are: the present-day disciples of Jesus. We've been called by the Gospel. We've had our minds opened to understand God's truth – how he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die for our sins, and how he raised him up to show that his sacrifice was accepted, and how life and salvation are open to all who believe in his name. And we have a sense that we are part of God's great plan of salvation – at least we should, for we are. We have a role to play in building his kingdom. So, let's get it on, shall we?

Ah, but things don't usually develop quite as quickly as we might like. Instead, things here in the church just seem to plod along. We come here and confess our sins and hear the absolution. We hear the same Bible stories year after year. We sing the same hymns – or worse, the pastor tries to get us to sing ones we don't know. We pray the prayers. We go to communion. We hear the blessing. And then next week, we do it all over again. But nothing changes. We still struggle with sin. We still struggle to pay the bills. And so many of our friends and neighbors are still outside the kingdom of God. Shouldn't we be doing *something* more productive? And the temptation is to think that if only we did *something* – specifically something borrowed from our former worldly way of life – it might produce more positive results.

The disciples found out otherwise. They spent the whole night working without catching a single fish. They thought they'd accomplish something on their own – on their own initiative and with their own hands, their sweat, and their dedicated toil; but instead they wasted a lot of effort achieving nothing. Why? Precisely because they did it on their own. They did it without Jesus. They did it without his Word. They grew impatient and thought they could make things happen in their own way and according to their own timetable. They were wrong.

And so, it is that when Jesus stands on the shore the next morning, they don't recognize him. They don't even recognize his voice when he calls out, "Tough night, huh fellas? Didn't catch anything, did you?" There even seems to be some resentment in their short and surly response, "No." "How dare anyone be so bright and chipper on such a rotten morning as this?" "Well, good news, guys; I think your luck's about to change. Try casting again on the right side of the boat." And now, *with the Word of Jesus*, their success is phenomenal – downright miraculous. What fascinates me, though, is that Peter still doesn't know who's standing on the shore. Even though this is the second time he's seen this miracle, he's so wrapped up in the amazing catch that it doesn't occur to him who is the only one who must be behind it. He has to be told that it's the Lord Jesus – the one on whose Word he should have waited in the first place.

But he's not the only one who had to be told that it was the Lord Jesus speaking. If you'll allow me to switch stories, in today's first reading we have Saul the self-righteous Pharisee zealously defending his faith and sacred traditions against the hated, heretical followers of that crucified blasphemer, Jesus of Nazareth. It's a name that Saul can't pronounce without scowling and spitting a curse. He's happy that Jesus was executed; and it's beyond his comprehension that anyone could still call themselves his followers. Oh, sure, he knows that they're *saying* that Jesus rose from the dead – and that he is still the promised Messiah. "They've got this crazy idea that he was some kind of sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that if you repent of your sins and trust in him, you'll be saved. It's nonsense of course. Every rational person knows that the Lord can only be pleased with someone who strives his utmost to live according to all his commands and decrees. People like *me*. That's what the true faith is all about: what we must do to please the Lord. Why, if what these wretches are saying is true, then everyone would be equal before God, and all my wonderful human works would mean nothing. That's why we must stamp it out. That's why we must stop it from spreading."

And so, it is that we find Saul on the road to Damascus at the head of an armed posse. He has a warrant from the high priest. He is to arrest all the Christians who fled the persecution in Jerusalem and bring them back in chains to face trial. And he's glad to be doing it. He is certain that he is serving God to the best of his ability – and just as certain that one day he'll be rewarded for all his fine work. "The Lord must really be happy with me."

But just as the city of Damascus comes into view and he can begin to feel the satisfaction of knowing how he'll soon be doing his duty and rounding up the renegades, he's knocked to the ground by a blinding flash of light. And as he lies there dazed and unable to see, he hears a voice calling, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" This isn't good. "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." "Uh-oh. This means ... *oh my Lord* ... this means I'm in heap big trouble."

Jesus directs the now sightless Saul to go into the city where he is to wait for further instructions. And then he has him sit in the dark for what surely must have been the longest three days in Saul's life. Can you even begin to imagine what was going on in his head? The fear? The regret? The astonishment about how he could have been so wrong? The terror about what was likely to happen next? Saul does nothing but wait for these three days; but let me say this: they are without question the three most productive days in his life. Why? Precisely because he wasn't doing anything that he thought was productive. Instead, the Word of God was working on him. Saul was a Bible scholar, after all. He knew the Scriptures like the back of his hand. But up until this point, he had always seen it through the lens of the Law of Moses. It was all about what man must do to be righteous before God. Now he was beginning to see things differently. Since Jesus is alive, since Jesus is the powerful Lord of light who stopped him on the road and blinded him, what these Christians are saying about him must be

true. Considering what Saul has been up to, that's truly frightening. So now Saul searches his memory for passages that describe a God of mercy – and there they are. They're all over the place. "Why didn't I see them before? I was so blind." Now Saul sees a God who resists the proud and who raises up the humble; a God who would send his only Son to take upon himself the sins of the world. "It's wonderful. But is it for me? Can it even be for someone who has cursed the name of Jesus and tortured and killed those who believe in him?" And so it is that Saul begins to pray. He prays a prayer of repentance and hope. And when next he hears the Word of Jesus spoken through his appointed messenger, his eyes are really opened – in more ways than one.

Looking at these two stories together, what I've have you see is that both the fishing disciples and Saul think they're doing something good for God's kingdom when they are operating on their own initiative and according to their own plans and ideas. The result is that disciples who believe in Jesus are at best non-productive, and Saul who doesn't believe is actually counter-productive. In both cases, it takes the Word of Jesus to turn things around. And that's the lesson for us – especially in those times when we are asked by the Lord to wait – when progress seems slow, when success as it's measured by the world seems elusive, when the daily struggle with sin seems long and hard, when despite all our prayers it seems that the Lord isn't answering, when we're tempted to take things into our own hands and use human solutions to spiritual problems. We need to wait on the Word of Jesus.

And it needs to be said that waiting on Jesus' Word *is* doing something. It's trusting him. It's remembering what he said. It's standing on his promises and understanding that he builds his kingdom and he works his will in and through us by his Word. Nor is waiting merely idle time. There's plenty to do as we await his Word on any particular issue. We have a lot of instructions, like "Watch and pray that you not enter temptation" and "Love one another as I have loved you" and "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly." Those alone ought to keep us extremely busy – while we wait on his Word.

And if we do wait on his Word, we will soon find his Word waiting on us – and here I mean "*waiting on*" in the sense of serving. That's what Peter and the disciples found when they came ashore. They toiled all night and caught nothing to eat, only to discover that Jesus already had breakfast laid on for them. And that's what Saul discovered too: that the Lord he had cursed and violently opposed had already forgiven him and set into motion a plan for his restoration and his most productive work for God's kingdom. In the same way, the Lord has a plan to care for and to use each of us for the building up of his kingdom. We all have a role to play – and we need not push it. All will be revealed in due course if only we wait on Jesus Word and let the Word of Jesus wait on us. God give us the grace to do so patiently in perfect hope and trust. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!