Book 23

Sunday, December 8, 1991

GOD'S WAITING ROOM Luke 3:1-6

Waiting is something most of us do not like to do but it's difficult to avoid. Some people are always in a hurry only to find that they still have to wait. When we think of "waiting rooms" the image in our minds is mostly negative. We've all spent time in waiting rooms when we had a physician's or dentist's or lawyer's appointment. When I was growing up in a small Missouri town, physicians did not see people by appointment. Instead they had large waiting rooms. If the doctor was in, you went to the waiting room and sat there until it was your turn. Sometimes it was difficult to remember whose turn was next.

There are special waiting rooms in hospitals. One type is located outside critical or coronary care. In this area, you wait the seemingly endless hours until you are allowed to visit the patient a few minutes at designated times each day. Then there is the surgical waiting room for those who have a family member or friend in surgery. After what feels like an interminable period of time, you are convinced that something has gone wrong. The waiting can be agonizing.

And there are the airport waiting areas, sometimes relatively quiet, but in the large airports usually noisy and packed with people. If the weather is bad so that flights are delayed then they are really crowded and frequently with angry upset people. Sometimes the airplane itself becomes a waiting room when it is in a

holding pattern before landing.

Nowadays there are waiting rooms everywhere. If you take your automobile to be serviced, there's a waiting room with coffee and magazines. Perhaps the worst waiting room for many people is where you go to get your driver's license. At least I hear more complaints about that one. There and in some other waiting rooms you take a number so that you know whose turn is next. I took an informal survey among some of our staff members last week about their worst waiting room experiences. Among the places they mentioned were waiting for a driver's test, waiting at the university to register for a class, or waiting to add or drop a course.

I think you will agree that "the waiting room" does

not carry a very positive image for most of us. Maybe all of us who are in a business or profession or if we work for a government agency or for a university or college where waiting rooms are necessary need to figure out ways to make them as pleasant and inviting as possible.

I believe the waiting room and the practice of waiting can also be a positive experience in many instances. There are times when we are waiting for something good to happen and the fact that we have to wait only makes it better. We can all remember the excitement in us when as children we waited for Christmas. Think of what Christmas would be like if there were no time of preparation or waiting. I can remember how filled with anticipation and joy I was as I waited in the special father's waiting room at the hospital for

each of our children to be born.

The season of Advent can be a time of joyful waiting for Christmas. In fact, waiting is one of the paradoxes of Christian living. It is one of the strong positive images in the Bible. The Psalmist wrote - "For God alone my soul waits in silence." (Psalm 62) Or again, "Take courage, wait for the Lord." (Psalm 27) And Isaiah reminds us, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

Luke begins the Christmas story by telling us of at least six people who were waiting with great anticipation and joy. Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist are waiting. They'd wanted a child for many years and had come to the conclusion that they would never have one.

Then, surprise, Elizabeth is pregnant and now there's only 9 months of waiting. Mary and Joseph are waiting. When and where will the baby be born? Another is Simeon, the old man who has faithfully been waiting in the Temple each day for the coming of God's Messiah. Finally there is the aged prophetess, Anna. Luke tells us she was married for seven years and widowed for eighty-five years. She spent a portion of each day fasting and praying in the Temple for God had told her that she would see the Messiah before she died.

What can we learn from these people about waiting and especially about waiting for God and about God waiting for us?

To begin we need to acknowledge that ours is

not a culture of waiting. Very few people are willing to wait for anything anymore. We want everything now. There's a big demand for instant gratification. Fast food is only one symbol of our culture. We talk of living life in the "fast lane" as being preferable over the slow lane. There is instant coffee, instant tea, quick cooking oatmeal, instant friendship, instant wealth, instant love, instant sex and some even believe they can have instant faith in God if and when they should ever need it.

I said in a sermon several years ago that the microwave oven is an appropriate appliance and symbol for a world where no one wants to wait very long for anything. Crockpot cooking is too slow. People want fast profits and get rich quick schemes. We no longer want to take the time to

save money to buy things, but want it all now. We even want to solve complex social problems instantly. We declare a war on drugs and think that maybe the drug problem can be solved in three to five years.

Another symbol of our not being willing to wait is what I call the "yellow light" syndrome. In the automobile world, the yellow traffic light is supposed to mean slow down and caution; in Lincoln, however and in many other cities too, the yellow light means hurry up and race through lest you get caught in the red light and lose precious time.

But there are some things that should not be hurried and there are some other things that cannot be hurried. In the category of things that

should not be hurried, we need a new emphasis in our time on "delayed gratification." One person defined "delayed gratification" this way. "Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way so as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with." Some children know how to do this instinctively. I watch a child eat a piece of cake. She carefully ate all around the piece so as to save the frosting to eat last. The essence of self-discipline is delayed gratification. There are many wonderful things in life that should not be hurried.

And there are other things that cannot be hurried no matter how much we try. For example it takes lots of time for a deep Christian faith to develop,

grow and mature. In fact our faith in God should never stop growing and maturing. It is never finished. We need to keep it cooking on low heat. Contrary to what we hear from certain evangelists, one is not "born again" instantly. You do not become a new person altogether in one minute. Yes, you can change the direction of your living, make a turn-around, but the journey to a maturing faith is a life-long process. If you have a problem with alcohol, you do not become a recovering alcoholic in an instant. All the rest of your life you are in recovery. The longest journey always begins with the first step, but there are many more steps that need to be made.

What is true about faith and trust in God is also true about human relationships. Deep and

lasting friendships do not happen instantly. They take time and patience to develop and mature. A beautiful marriage with strong and abiding love is not something that can be hurried. People grow in their love for each other over the years.

God cannot be hurried. God's timetable is frequently different from ours. Unlike many of our human constructed waiting rooms, God's waiting room can be a wonderful place. Think of this season of Advent as being "God's waiting room." Here are some of the things we can learn while we are in God's waiting room.

First, there is a sense in which we are always waiting for God. As human beings we never totally possess God although some people act as if they do. Here is a theologian who does not

wait for God because he think he possesses God enclosed within a doctrine. Or here is a Biblical student who does not wait for God because she believes she possesses God enclosed in a book. Those of us in the church do not always wait for God because we think we have God in the institution. We have some knowledge of God and some experience of God, but we never possess God. We are always waiting for God. God visits us in God's own time and way. Elijah the prophet waited for God while hiding in a cave. A great wind came up, but God was not in the wind. Then an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake, then a fire, and God was not in the fire. Elijah waited! Then God came to him in a still small voice. One of the most beautiful and telling sons in the oratorio, Elijah, comes at this point when the soloist sings, "O rest in the Lord,

wait patiently for him."

Second, in God's waiting room we learn that God is the ultimate model of waiting. The scriptures speak of God as being patient, long-suffering, slow to anger and a keeper of promises no matter how long it takes. God works and acts in eternity where the pressures of time have no bearing. God cannot be rushed. Rather, God offers slow truth for a fast world. Sometimes God seems far away and the timetables of God seem exceedingly long. But God waits with us. God waits for us.

A mystic wrote: "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." That's quite a challenge and promise for us. In God's waiting room we can learn the important truth that God

cannot be hurried. God will come to us in God's own time and God's own way. However there's a tremendous reward in the waiting. "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength."

Third, in God's waiting room, we have the opportunity to learn well the lesson of victorious patience. There are many who wait but never learn the secret of patience. Some wait but are only ground to pieces by the weariness of waiting. Some only wait for something to be over--an illness, a crisis, a bad moment.

One may be forced by circumstance to wait, yet not be changed by the waiting. But there is another alternative. We can use the waiting for our benefit. Waiting, even in difficult circumstances, can be a time for spiritual growth.

I'm sure that sometimes we find ourselves in God's waiting room because God knows we need to be there. God knows we need to slow down and stop. We need to take time out and wait for God.

The secret of patient waiting is acceptance. This is not simply giving up to the forces of fate because there's nothing to do but sit and wait. Patience is not reluctant surrender to the flow of uncontrollable events. Patience is a power to see the invisible purposes of God in all things. And sometimes only by waiting can we see God's purposes.

So, no matter what your experience has been in other waiting rooms, God's waiting room is a place of safety and comfort.

Think of this season of Advent as being God's waiting room. Do not rush about madly. Do not hurry needlessly. Take some time to wait for God. Amen.