Sunday, December 7, 1997
WAITING FOR GOD
Luke 3:1-6

This season, which we Christians call Advent, is for many a time of joyful, expectant waiting for Christmas, and yet for others, the waiting is a time of loneliness and depression.

Waiting is one of the paradoxes of life. It can be a positive, uplifting experience, and at other times, a negative, dreadful experience. Some people try to escape life by waiting and never doing anything. They are afraid to make any decision and so they put off taking any action as long as possible.

Here's a young man who notices a small cavity in a tooth but puts off going to the dentist until the pain becomes unbearable. Then the cavity is too large and the tooth has to be extracted. He has waited too long.

Or here's a young woman who suspects she has a serious health problem but is afraid to see a physician, and so she waits too long. By the time she makes an appointment, the cancer has spread. This is a negative kind of waiting, where a person waits in fear until they are forced to take action, and then sometimes it's too late.

Or here is a person who has been deeply hurt by someone. A relationship has been broken, and one or both of the people involved waits and waits and waits for an apology. In the meantime, one or both holds a grudge while they wait and never get on with their lives. Similarly, some people wait for years to get revenge on someone who has hurt them, and in the meantime, do nothing else except carry hate. All their waiting is a waste of time.

Another side of the paradox of waiting is that some people have difficulty waiting for anything and take action too soon. Sometimes, without any waiting at all, they rush in and try to fix a problem, and end up doing more harm than good.

Several months ago, I was talking with a retired lawyer in our church who spends time volunteering as a court-appointed mediator in the small claims court when both sides agree to try mediation. The two parties in dispute spend time with the mediator in a private room. He said that one of the things he discovered is the importance of waiting. After each person has stated their case, instead of making a suggestion, he says nothing, and they all sit together in silence. After a period of waiting, a compromise frequently comes to the surface.

One of my favorite stories is about a dear, 80-year-old woman who nearly lost her life because she couldn't wait. She took great pride in keeping a perfect yard. That was her full-time job, and she drove herself into impossible extremes. One day, a neighbor found her screaming in pain under a tree in her front yard. He called 911, and she was brought to the emergency room of the hospital. She was in extreme pain with an obvious broken hip. The doctor asked her what had happened. She said, "I fell from the top of the tree while picking leaves." "Picking what?" the doctor asked. "Picking the leaves," she answered. "I like to get them before they fall and make a mess in the yard."

She was serious. Her neighbor confirmed it. Every fall, she tried to pick as many leaves from the trees as possible before they had a chance to fall to the ground.

I wonder how many of us increase the stress or cause stress in our lives because we can't wait, especially in this season. We have to be doing something all the time. A friend of mine said to me, "People are no longer human beings. We should be called human doings."

A major theme of Advent centers around the right kind of joyful, expectant waiting, which is different from the kind of negative waiting when we are afraid to take any action.

The emphasis on joyful, expectant waiting is present in many of the teachings and stories in the Bible. The Psalmist wrote, "Take courage, wait for the Lord." (Psalm 27) The prophet Isaiah said, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

Luke begins the Christmas story by telling us about six people who were waiting with anticipation and joy. Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, were hoping and waiting for years for the birth of a child. They'd even come to the conclusion that they would never have one. Then, surprise, Elizabeth is pregnant, and now there's only nine months of waiting.

Mary and Joseph are waiting. When and where will the baby be born? What will his future be? Simeon is another faithful soul who has been waiting for years for the coming of God's Messiah. One day, his faithful waiting is rewarded when Mary and Joseph bring the little child Jesus to the Temple. In addition to Simeon, there is Anna, another devout person who has faithfully been waiting. Luke tells us that for many years she spent a portion of each day fasting and praying in the Temple, for God had told her that she would see God's Messiah before she died. Like Simeon, her waiting is fulfilled.

In addition to these six, John the Baptist has also been waiting. As a small boy and young man, he knew that God had some special calling for him, but he had to wait for years before God made it clear. He was anxious to get started, and yet he knew he had to wait.

And then it happened. Luke tells us that "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, the Word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness." His long period of waiting was now over.

What can we learn from these people about the right kind of waiting, especially about waiting for God and how God waits for us?

To begin, we need to acknowledge that ours is a culture that does not easily tolerate waiting. Very few people are willing to wait for anything these days. We want everything now. There's a big demand for instant gratification. Fast food is only one symbol of our culture. People talk of living in the "fast lane" as being preferable to the slow lane. There is instant coffee, instant tea, quick-cooking oatmeal, instant friendship, instant wealth, instant sex, and some even believe they can have instant spiritual maturity or instant faith in God when and if they should ever need it.

I said in a sermon several years ago that the microwave oven is an appropriate symbol for a world where no one wants to wait very long for anything. Crockpot cooking is too slow. We had a crockpot in our home years before we purchased a microwave, but we haven't used it for years.

People want fast profits and get-rich-quick schemes. We no longer want to take the time to save money to buy what we want. We even want to solve complex social problems instantly.

Not many years ago, we declared war on poverty in the belief that we could defeat poverty quickly. We declared war on drugs, hoping that maybe the drug problem could be solved in a few years.

Another symbol of our not being willing to wait is the “yellow light” syndrome. In the traffic light world, the yellow light is supposed to mean slow down and caution. It’s a signal that tells you the light is ready to change to red.

In Lincoln, however, and in many other cities too, the yellow light means hurry up and race through the intersection lest you get caught at the red light and lose precious time. Or if the car in front of us does not start moving quickly enough when the light changes, we get very impatient and even angry.

There are now so many so-called “time-saving” devices available in addition to the microwave that one of the biggest mysteries is, what are we doing with all the time we are saving?

At the same time that we acknowledge that ours is a culture that does not easily tolerate waiting, our Christian faith teaches us that “waiting” can be a very 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 we felt 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 also remember being filled with anticipation and joy as I waited in the special father’s waiting room at the hospital for each of our children to be born. And even before that, the nine months of anticipation and waiting added joy to the birth. It’s difficult for me to imagine what it would be like in these instances if there was no time of preparation or waiting.

There are some things in life that should not be instant or hurried; where waiting, preparation, and anticipation are part of the enjoyment.

You are invited to a dinner party, and the host and hostess have spent a lot of time preparing the table and the food. It would be a mistake to rush in the front door, sit down, and eat as quickly as possible. It takes time to savor the food and enjoy sitting at the table with each other. You can think of other occasions when waiting and the anticipation that comes from waiting and not hurrying add joy to the event itself.

And there are other times in life where waiting is absolutely necessary. Not waiting is not an option. When you plant seeds in the springtime, you have to wait for the seed to germinate and grow. In a similar way, it takes a lot of time, and that includes periods of waiting, to develop a deep and abiding faith in God. Growing and maturing in faith is filled with starts and stops. It is not one continuous journey at a constant speed. The journey of life itself has starts and stops, detours, holding patterns, delays, getting lost along the way, finding new directions, and even changing destinations. There’s a lot of waiting to be done in our life’s journey.

Contrary to what we hear from certain evangelists, one is not “born again” instantly. You do not become a new person with a deep faith in God altogether in one minute. Yes, you can make a decision to change the direction of your life, make a turnaround, but the journey to a mature faith is a life-long process that includes periods of waiting.

What is true about faith and trust in God is also true in human relationships. Deep and lasting friendships do not take place instantly. They take time, patience, and waiting to develop and mature. A beautiful marriage based on a strong and abiding love is not something that can be hurried.

God cannot be hurried. God's timetable is frequently different from ours. In developing a deep relationship with God, a lot of waiting is necessary. Sometimes God seems far away, and only our waiting can bring God closer. God's presence comes to us in its own time and way.

Elijah the prophet waited for God while hiding in a cave. He was depressed and never felt farther away from God. All he could do was wait. A great wind came up, but God was not in the wind. Then an earthquake, then a fire, but still Elijah had to wait. Then God came to him in a still, small voice. One of the most beautiful and telling songs in the oratorio, Elijah, comes at this point when the soloist sings, "O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him."

God is the ultimate model of waiting. The Bible speaks 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. The timetables of God can 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." Waiting, even in difficult circumstances, can be a time for spiritual growth. We can use the waiting for our benefit.

Dear friends, during this season of Advent, do not always be rushing around. Try this simple experiment: the next time you are caught at a traffic light or at any other time you are forced to wait, use the waiting to say a brief prayer of gratitude. Take time out to wait for God. You can be sure that God is waiting for you. Amen.