Sunday, May 24, 1998
SOMETIMES WE HAVE TO WAIT
Acts 1:4-11

Most of us do not like to wait for anything, but it's difficult to avoid. We don't like to admit it, but everything in the world does not run on a schedule that is controlled by us. Last Monday afternoon, my wife and I were driving back from Kansas City. As we entered the expressway late in the afternoon, we were caught in a massive traffic jam. It took us one hour to travel 3 miles. The tie-up was caused by an accident several miles ahead of us. We had no choice but to wait.

As our world becomes more crowded, there's more and more waiting. One accident at the wrong hour of the day can cause thousands of people to wait. Last Tuesday night, the Galaxy IV satellite suffered a computer failure and rotated out of position. It severed a lifeline in American business and society that most people never knew existed. At least eight of the 10 biggest paging companies depend on Galaxy IV and were unable to supply service to millions of customers, which meant that all of those pagers did not work. Drivers at Chevron gas stations couldn't use pumps at thousands of service stations. Think of the waiting that caused. Our lives are more and more interconnected.

Because most of us do not like to wait, when we think of "waiting rooms" the image is mostly negative. We've all spent time in waiting rooms when we had a physician's, 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. You didn't even take a number. It was on the "honor" system. Sometimes it was difficult to remember whose turn was next.

There are special rooms for waiting in hospitals: intensive care waiting rooms, surgery waiting rooms, maternity waiting rooms.

Airports can be notorious for waiting. If the weather is bad and flights are delayed, they become crowded with anxious and sometimes irritable people. Sometimes the airplane itself becomes a waiting room when it is in a holding pattern before landing or you have to wait in line for the runway to clear.

Nowadays, there are special rooms for waiting everywhere. If you take your automobile to be serviced, there's a waiting room with coffee and magazines. People tell me that the worst waiting room for them is where you go to get your driver's license. Others tell me they dislike the waiting at the university to register for a class or to drop a course.

I think you will agree that "waiting" does not carry a very positive image for most of us, but there are some wonderful exceptions.

There are times when we are waiting for something good to happen, and the fact that we have to wait only makes it better. Deferring gratification can be a positive experience. The anticipation and planning for an event can help to make the whole experience more enjoyable.

Let's say you are planning a trip to somewhere you've always wanted to go. The weeks of planning, the waiting, the anticipation can be part of the fun.

We can all remember the excitement in us as children while we eagerly 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 father's waiting room at the hospital for each of our children to be born.

In every one of our lives, there are going to be times when it is necessary to wait, and that's also true in our relationship with God. In fact, waiting is one of the paradoxes of Christian living. It is one of the strong positive experiences of God in the Bible. The Psalmist wrote: "For God alone my soul waits in silence." (Psalm 62) "Take courage. Wait for the Lord." (Psalm 27) The prophet Isaiah tells us, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

After the resurrection, the disciples learned that it was necessary to wait. According to the story in the book of Acts, in his last appearance to the disciples after Easter, Jesus told them that he would be leaving them and they would no longer experience him in the same physical presence to which they had become accustomed. He went on to tell them that once he was gone from them physically, they should "not leave Jerusalem, but wait there for the promise of the Father."

When they asked him how long they might have to wait, he said (and I'm paraphrasing), "I can't tell you. All you can do is wait. As you wait with patience, God's Spirit will lead you in the right path, and you will know what to do and when to do it."

Jesus told them to wait because he knew they would need time to get used to his absence and that in their waiting they would begin to see and understand him in a way that was not possible before. This might sound like a contradiction, so let me explain. It often takes "waiting," distance in time as well as in space, to give us perspective. When we are too close to an event or person, we cannot see that person or event in the same way we can from a distance.

I can remember my dad saying when he was about ready to make a major decision, "I'm not going to decide tonight. I'm first going to sleep on it." In other words, "I'm going to wait." The right kind of waiting can bring things into focus.

Peter Drucker, in his books on leadership, says over and over again that the most important decisions a leader makes are personnel decisions, and he advises leaders not to make those decisions in haste but rather to wait and take the necessary time. We know the old saying, "haste makes waste."

"Take time, wait," said Jesus. That's good advice for all of us. Sometimes when we are not able to comprehend something and we're not sure what to do next, the best thing is to wait.

When an overwhelming and unexpected change comes into our lives and we're not sure what it all means, then wait! Don't panic and take action too soon. Your spouse of 50 years dies. Don't make hasty decisions about what to do next — wait!

But it's not easy. Ours is not a culture of waiting. Very few people are willing to wait for anything. We want everything now. Fast food is only one symbol of not wanting to wait. People talk of living life in the "fast lane" as being preferable to the slow lane. There is instant coffee, instant tea, instant oatmeal, 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 some years ago that the microwave oven is an appropriate symbol for a world where no one wants to wait very long. 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 believe we can solve complex social problems instantly.

Obviously, not all waiting is good. Some people try to escape responsibility by waiting and never do anything. They have no energy because they dare not face life. Other people dread making decisions and put off action as long as possible because they are always afraid. There are people who have their security in the status quo and would wait forever before trying anything new. Waiting can be the result of laziness or indifference.

Someone told me that he had been waiting a long, long time for his ship to come in. He will be waiting forever because he never sent a ship out.

Now we know that waiting too long to get out of bed and begin walking following surgery can be detrimental to healing. If we always waited until we felt like it, we might never get out of bed.

Yet our faith tells us that sometimes we have to wait! There are things in life that cannot be hurried no matter how much we try. For example, it takes time for a deep faith in God to develop, grow, and mature. In fact, our faith in God should never stop growing and maturing. It is never finished. Being willing to wait is part of the maturation process.

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 turnaround, begin your journey in a new direction, but the journey to a maturing faith is a life-long process.

If you have a problem with alcohol, you do not become a recovered alcoholic in an instant. All the rest of your life you are in recovery, and if you are honest, you will describe yourself as a “recovering” not a “recovered” alcoholic. The longest journey always begins with the first step, but there are many more steps that need to be taken, and sometimes in the journey, we have to wait.

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, and some waiting is involved.

If you are parents, then you know that waiting is involved in helping your children grow and mature. There are times when you can do nothing but wait for a young person to discover the right path for him or her. Sometimes for the parents, the waiting can be agonizing.

God cannot be hurried. God’s timetable is not always the same as ours, and it’s easy for us to become impatient. In fact, 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 thinks he possesses God enclosed within a doctrine. Or here is a Biblical student who does not wait for God because she is certain that she possesses God enclosed in a book.

Those of us who are actively involved 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 altogether.

There is a sense in which we are always waiting for God. This is to say that God visits us in God's own time and way.

Elijah the prophet waited for God while hiding in fear in a cave. A great wind came up, but God was not in the wind. Then an earthquake, then a fire, and God was not in them. Elijah waited. Then God came to him "in a still small voice." One translation says, "a still small silence."

One of the most beautiful songs in the oratorio, Elijah, comes at this point when the soloist sings, "O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him." Elijah has learned that sometimes we have to wait.

Not only are we always waiting for God, but something positive can happen to us in the waiting. Waiting is not necessarily a waste of time. Elijah learned to trust during his waiting so that the next time he had to wait, he was thankful for the time of waiting. It can be a time of healing and growth. We can use the time of waiting for our benefit.

Waiting can also keep us from making mistakes. One of the parables of Jesus is about that kind of waiting. A farmer sowed some seed in his field. After a time, he noticed that some weeds were also growing among the good plants. His servants wanted to rush in and pull out the weeds, but the farmer told them to wait. If they acted too hastily, they would destroy some of the good plants along with the weeds.

He reminded them that in the early stages of growth, it was not always possible to tell the good plants from the weeds. Furthermore, in the growth process, some of the roots would be intertwined so that in pulling up the weeds too quickly, they would damage some of the good plants.

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 the timetables of God seem exceedingly long. But God waits with us and 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 waiting for God, we can learn the important truth that God cannot be hurried and that many of the other good things in life cannot be hurried. God will come to us in God's own time and in God's own way. However, there's a reward in waiting—"those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." Amen.