

Playing the waiting game isn't always fun, and it can be a difficult thing for us to do, especially now a days with technology and other tools providing us with countless ways to receive instant gratification! If we want that new book, or song, or movie that recently came out, no problem, all we need to do is sit down at our computers or grab our Kindles, Ipods, or tablets, and we can download them via the internet within a matter of seconds with the click of a button. If we order something online, and don't want to wait a week or two to get it, we can have it shipped over night and we will receive it the very next day!

Whether we are waiting for a package to be delivered, waiting for a television show to return from hiatus, or waiting for an answered prayer, playing the waiting game can often times be rough. We become so impatient in some instances that we may even begin to reflect on the people, places, or things that are keeping us from getting what we want. In fact, it seems like the more we want something, the harder it is to wait...especially when we are struggling in life, or are experiencing hardship and are trying to find relief. When someone we love is sick, and the doctors are running all sorts of tests it can be frustrating when all we can do is wait for a diagnosis. If we are struggling financially it can be rather difficult bidding our time until the next paycheck arrives. When life throws troubles are way, sometimes all we can do is pray to God to help us, and then while we wait for an answer we may even get impatient with God!

If and when this happens, we have to remember that God's timing is different than our own. He views things from a different perspective, and sees the whole picture, not just what we want, but what is best for us in the grand plan for our lives. Of course, when we are hoping, praying, and filled with expectation, it's easy to forget this. After all, waiting is "remaining inactive in one place while expecting something." And being inactive means feeling powerless and at the mercy of the world, and I'm fairly certain that nobody likes feeling that way. We must try to keep in mind that God always has a greater plan and his timing is perfect, even if we don't always see it from his perspective.

We are provided with a great illustration of this in our Gospel story this morning, when Mary and her sister Martha can do nothing but hope, pray, and wait. They play the waiting game, if you will, as they send a messenger to Jesus to let him know that their brother Lazarus is gravely ill and in need of healing. So how does

Jesus respond to their request for help? Does he gather his disciples together and do they depart at once on a journey back to the town of Bethany? Does he heal Lazarus from a distance, as he does for the centurion who came to him on behalf of his servant? No! Instead, Jesus sends the messenger back to the sisters with an encouraging, yet cryptic message “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

He then waits two more days before his departure from Bethabara. Now, at first glance this may seem a rather odd way for Jesus to react, especially considering the fact that John’s Gospel makes it clear that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were his friends and he loved them! I can’t imagine that any of us would let someone we love suffer if it was within our power, or if we had the skills or the resources to help them. When my mother was fighting her battle with cancer and was going through a stem cell transplant, I did not hesitate to take action when I was asked to donate blood so they could harvest some of my platelets. Yet, as we continue in our story we see that Jesus had his reasons for making Mary and Martha wait.

Although Jesus may have wanted to protect his friends from their grief, he follows God’s will, relies on God’s timing, and out of their tragic circumstances he saw an opportunity to glorify God. It also provided him with a way to increase the faith of the two sisters, along with the faith of his disciples and the crowd of people that would witness the great miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection! Sometimes it is not important that we Christians are comfortable, but it is important that we glorify God in all that we do!

Our first reaction to how Jesus handles the situation, before bringing back Lazarus from the dead, might be one of shock or even anger that Mary, Martha, and their family and friends would have to go through such heartache. But we must not forget that Jesus did not make them wait without any words of encouragement or hope. Our Lord’s message to the sisters did not say that their brother would not die. It promised only that death would not be the ultimate result, for the ultimate result would be the glory of God. He wanted them to lay hold of this promise; in fact, he reminded Martha of this message when she balked at having the tomb opened.

When we find ourselves confronted by disease, disappointment, delay, and even death, sometimes our only encouragement is the Word of God. We must live by faith, and not by sight. Mary and Martha’s situation

may appear to be hopeless, yet the sisters knew that Jesus was the Master of every situation. The promise in Psalm 50:15 finds a parallel here: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

Getting back to our Lord’s delay...He was not waiting for Lazarus to die, for he was already dead when the messenger arrived. Jesus lived on a divine timetable and he was most likely waiting for his Father to tell him when to go to Bethany. The fact that Lazarus had been dead four days gave even greater authenticity to the miracle, and greater opportunity for people to believe, including his own disciples! According to biblical scholars, at that time there was a tradition that one’s soul hovered near the body for three days and after that time, there was no hope of a resurrection. Jesus actions of bringing back Lazarus to life demonstrated that not only can God do the impossible, remember Jesus prays to God in our story and thanks him for hearing him, but it was also a foreshadowing of his own death and Resurrection. He would die on the cross, be placed in a tomb for three days, and just as God would help bring Lazarus out of the tomb, he would do the same for his Son!

In our Gospel this morning, both Mary and Martha appear to be struggling with their faith as they wait for Jesus. Even though Martha runs out to meet Jesus when he arrives and she professes a great faith in him through her words, her actions don’t show it. When Jesus fails to act right away, to provide her with instant gratification, she runs back to her sister Mary and she tells a little white lie, “The teacher is here and he wants to see you!” When Mary hears her sister’s proclamation she goes out to see Jesus, repeats Martha’s words, that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus’ death if he had been with them, and she falls at his feet and weeps.

As we look at this story, what are we doing as we wait for God? Is our faith shining through our words and our actions? I have an illustration I’d like to share with you as you consider your answers to those questions ... During the Thirty Years’ War in the 17th century, German pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home. One night as they stayed in a small village inn, homeless and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair. To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of certain Scripture promises about God’s provision and keeping. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, he too broke down and wept. He felt he had come to his darkest hour. Soon afterward, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed anew the Lord’s

presence. Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many. "Give to the winds thy fears; hope, and be undismayed; God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears; God shall lift up thy head. Through waves and clouds and storms He gently clears the way. Wait thou His time, so shall the night soon end in joyous day."

It is often in our darkest times that God makes His presence known most clearly. He uses our sufferings and troubles to show us that He is our only source of strength. And when we see this truth, like Paster Gerhardt, we receive new hope.

Are you facing a great trial? Take heart. Put yourself in God's hands. Wait for His timing. He will give you a "song in the night." What are we doing as we await the return of Our Lord? Just as Paul's hymn declares we should wait on the Lord's timing for the night to end, our Lord Jesus will often come to us, and his light will shine through the people we meet, through his Word which we encounter in scripture, and through his Spirit that we have claimed in Baptism.

Perhaps the most peculiar paradigm of faith in our story this morning is Lazarus, which we haven't even discussed. He is dead in the grave. Lazarus can do nothing for himself. All he can do is receive the power of God to give him new life. A similar illustration is given in our first lesson from Ezekiel. The call to faith is a call to die, so that God's power might be manifested giving us life.

Theologically, we have died in baptism and we die in daily repentance, yet God continues to raise us to new life. However sometimes after God has given us new life, we still want to keep ourselves wrapped up and bound in our grave clothes –signs of the old life. We can either keep ourselves bound up by holding onto those sins from which Jesus has freed us, or we can remember that through Jesus' sacrifice we witness the precious gift of forgiveness and life that he gives to all the people whom he loves. Just as he invited his friend Lazarus to come out of the graveyard, Jesus invites us all to come out of our tombs, and to take off our stinking bandages! And when we do.... God can and will breathe new life into us! Remember we don't have to wait for life after death to live our lives for God, we can live the life God intends for us now! And our Lord's timing is perfect, it is everything! Thanks be to God!