

This is the first Sunday of Advent, a season dedicated to waiting. Lighting the candles in the Advent wreath is a way of literally counting down the weeks until Christmas. So, we begin the new church year by spiritually placing ourselves in that time before the birth of Jesus, when people were waiting on God to do a new thing. For generation after generation, the Hebrew people waited for a messiah.

The idea of waiting for God runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. We see it in our psalm this morning. The psalmist addresses God saying, “Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame...” The psalmist continues, “Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.”

There is a saying: “Good things come to those who wait.” Most of us probably first heard that saying at a time when we were a bit impatient. The witness of the Bible is, not only do good things come to those who wait, but amazing things come to those who wait on the Lord.

However, waiting does not always come easy. Waiting is such a big part of life and can be so annoying, countless songs have been written about it. The band Foreigner – I’ve been Waiting for a Girl Like You. The Velvet Underground – “I’m waiting for the man,” the Aretha Franklin and George Michael duet – I Knew You were Waiting for Me, The Kinks – Tired of Waiting for You, The Rolling Stones – “I’m just waiting on a friend.”

For people who have become so accustomed and entitled to immediate gratification, waiting is hard. In late October, I was driving in my car and I heard Christmas music for the first time this year. I thought to myself, “Really? You couldn’t even wait until we got Halloween behind us?”

The pandemic has largely been a test of our capacity to wait. We waited for vaccines. We waited for kids to return to school. Grandparents waited to see grandchildren. Many still do. We’ve been waiting and waiting for life to get back to normal. My sense is a lot of us are done waiting on some of these things.

But here’s the thing. Many things in life, perhaps the most important things, require waiting. Some have estimated we spend 4-6 months of our entire lives waiting for things like coffee to brew, waiting “on hold,” waiting at red lights, for videos to load, delayed flights, and for friends or spouses who tend to be tardy. You know who you are.

Also, God’s timing and our timing don’t always match up. God has a perspective that we don’t. I think about when I was a kid, I didn’t always understand why my parents made me wait for things I wanted. Now, I realize they had a perspective I didn’t. When I was hungry, I wanted to eat, but my mom or dad would say, “Don’t snack now, because, in one hour, we’re going to sit down to your favorite meal. Wait and you will be glad you did.”

I think a similar thing happens with our relationship with God. We might want something immediately, but God has a perspective you and I don’t have. We might ask for things that we’re not spiritually mature enough to handle. Or we might want something that we think is beneficial, but God knows better. It has been said that God answers prayer in one of three ways: yes, no, and wait. Therefore, there is a spirituality to waiting.

I want to say, up front, there are some things that should not wait. There is something we might call “holy impatience.” In the Bible, God is repeatedly impatient with oppression, for example. In his letter from the Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King expressed more disappointment with well-meaning liberals who were telling him he was moving too fast in demanding civil rights, then with overt racists like the KKK.

I would argue we are morally obligated to move quickly when it comes to alleviating suffering. When it comes to mitigating the effects of climate change, for example, we are morally obligated to act swiftly. People in various parts of the world are already struggling with its effects.

At the same time, there is a spirituality to waiting. The psalmist alludes to it. First, the psalmist recognizes his dependence on God. He wrote, “Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.” Here, the psalmist recognizes the need for God and is willing to give God control.

I would suggest, one of the gifts of waiting is realizing our interdependence on one another and what a blessing that can be. I hosted Thanksgiving at my house for a handful of people. On Wednesday, I realized I wanted to put the leaf in the dining room table.

I began to pull the table apart and get the leaf out of the closet. The leaf is fairly heavy and awkward. I could have done it myself if I had to, but I realized it would be so much easier and quicker if I waited until my nephews came the next morning.

Not only would the job be easier if I waited, but it would give my guests another way to contribute to the meal. If I did it myself, I would deprive someone of the satisfaction of being useful. It was a small thing, but in that situation, there was a gift in waiting. As the psalmist indicates, there is value in recognizing our dependence on one another.

A second gift of waiting I want to raise is the building of trust. The psalmist begins, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame...” We don’t know what trouble the psalmist was facing, but while he waits for God’s help, he trusts that God will indeed respond and he prays for deliverance.

What if you and I were to view the times of waiting in our lives as an invitation to pray? Years ago, I started doing this form of prayer called breath prayer. The breath prayer that I used was a verse from Mark’s gospel. It went like this. As I inhaled, I would say the words “I believe.” As I exhaled, I would continue the verse saying, “Help my unbelief.”

I would breathe that breath prayer at various times, but where it really came in handy was in traffic jams. When I felt myself starting to get angry or aggravated, I’d remind myself to say my breath prayer. I took those moments in which there was nothing I could do but sit and wait, as opportunities to pray: “I believe, Lord, help my unbelief.” I’ll tell you, that practice became an important part of my spiritual life. To this day, I’ll sometimes find myself doing my breath prayer without having made a conscious decision to do so.

Anytime we find ourselves waiting, we can use that time as an opportunity to pray. In fact, because Advent is a season of waiting, we’re inviting you to do something a little different this Advent season. Recognizing that the holiday season is difficult for a lot of people who have experienced loss or some kind of hardship, we’re designating a tree in front of the parish house as a prayer tree.

During the weeks of Advent, we are inviting you to identify something that you are grieving or lamenting, some sadness you carry. You can write it on a tag and hang it in the tree. You could also write a short prayer or something you're hoping for. As best I can, I will read those tags. During Advent, I want to be in prayer around everything that's represented in that tree. This is a way we can make the waiting during Advent and opportunity to pray.

There are gifts in waiting. Waiting can humble us and help us to recognize our dependence on one another. Waiting can be an invitation to pray and to develop trust that God will provide, that God does care about our situation, and that God can respond in surprising ways.

Lastly, there is something particularly important about waiting for God. I'm convinced, more than ever, we can't solve the world's problems by ourselves. The forces of evil are too strong. We need to rely on a power greater than our own. The prophet Isaiah said it this way. He said, "Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." God can provide us strength that we can't muster for ourselves.

Years ago, I heard a story about a young boy was hanging around with some friends. He told them to wait while he goes into the convenience store to get some candy. He walks into the store and sees that there is a barrel full of penny candy near the cash register. The boy steps up to the counter, reaches into his pocket, and pulls out a bunch of pennies. He says to the man at the cash register, "How much candy can I get for a handful of pennies?"

The cashier said, "Well, for a handful of pennies, I suppose you can get a handful of candy." He said, "Go on over there, reach in, and grab yourself a handful of candy." The boy walks over to the barrel, but he stands there looking at the candy and then looking back at the cashier.

The man said, "Go ahead! Just reach in." The boy continued to stand there and look back-and-forth. Finally, the man got a little exasperated. He came out from around the counter and said, "I'll show you. You just reach in your hand, like this, and grab a handful. Now, take this and be on your way."

When the boy came out of the store, one of his friends asked, "What took you so long? I thought you were just going in for some candy." The boy said, "I did, but when I looked at my hand and then I looked at the cashier's hands, I knew that, if I waited long enough, I'd walk out of there with so much more."

Friends, I just want you to know that there's value in waiting. God's hands are much bigger than our hands. Good things come to those who wait and wonderful things come to those who wait on the Lord.