

WAITING FOR JOY
Psalm 130; Luke 2

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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I have never been given an award for patience. If I possess any virtues, the ability to wait is not listed among them.

It all started when I was a child and my family decided to go to Disney World. The Magic Kingdom. In the days even before VCRs, about three times a year my family would do the naughty thing and skip Sunday night church. We would visit my grandparents and watch the Walt Disney Show. The show's opening tag showed visions of the Kingdom. What a wonderful place it promised to be. Even the bushes are shaped like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. The people in the pictures appeared to be so very happy.

I'd heard that one could dive to the depth of 20,000 leagues under the sea, be rushed in the darkness on Mr. Toad's wild ride, hear the gunshots and witness the flare of the fire in the pirate's cave, or watch long-gone presidents give speeches. Three Sunday night skips a year were not enough to satiate the desire to know more about the Magic Kingdom. I had one of those little view finders, and I had Disney discs. I would hold them up to the bright, summer light and see the Kingdom itself. Even the popsicles are shaped like the Big Mouse. You could walk into the future. In the mind of this little boy, there could surely be no other place this grand – at least no other place on earth. I had to go and see the magic for myself.

My father had the bright idea that it would be equally educational for us to ride the Amtrak train. We were to drive our automobile on the never-ending (well, it was only two hours, but for me, waiting to get to the Kingdom, it seemed an eternity) trip from Greenville, South Carolina to Columbia, South Carolina, where we would finally board the train which would take us to a land so far away, so different, so grand.

We arrived at the train station, only to be told that the train was running just a tad bit behind. In those days, the expected time of arrival was displayed with changeable, rack-like numbers. Surely, it could be no more than 10 minutes late. But every time the ten minutes passed, the clerk would change the numbers to another 10 minutes ahead. The arrival of the train was constantly outdistancing us. It was the wait of a lifetime. We waited and we waited and we waited some more. We were miserable. Couldn't the conductor understand that we needed to get to Disney World? Had the engineer lost his mind? Had he never heard of the Land of the Mouse?

There was one of God's special people also waiting for that train to Orlando – a little girl whose mind and emotions were running behind her body. She asked her father every thirty seconds, in a loud audible voice, "Daddy, is the train here yet?" Her child-like mind was asking the same

question that all of us were trying to ignore. We were trying to entertain ourselves, or at least my mother was – trying to entertain her two sons with something, anything to get their mind off of waiting for the train. Like dripping water, this special, innocent girl asked her father at calculated, repetitious intervals: “Daddy, is the train here yet?” “Daddy, is the train here yet?” “Daddy, is the train here yet?”

So there we sat in a train station, from ten o’clock to eleven o’clock, to 12 a.m. to 1 a.m. to 2 a.m. I don’t even remember when we boarded. Hearing every 30 seconds the repeated question, “Daddy, is the train here yet?”

Waiting in the Amtrak train station was one of those rare moments in life when seconds seem like years, minutes become decades, and hours become millennia.

Finally, at last in the great distance we heard the whistle of the train. What relief I felt when, at last, the train to the Magic Kingdom pulled into the station.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

The Covid culture has created a lot of waiting as well. The *Wall Street Journal* recently published an article entitled “Some Peloton Buyers Are Sick of Waiting.” With all the stay-at-home orders in place and the need to exercise, people have turned to Peloton, but Peloton can’t produce the exercise equipment fast enough to meet the demand. Customers are griping online, flooding customer service lines and defecting to competing brands because they have lost their patience with Peloton. (Sharon Terlep, 11/24/2020)

Quite truthfully, it seems that no matter what business someone is in, the conversation begins with, “Due to Covid,” and then you’re told to lower your expectations, increase your anticipation, and wait.

Yes, the Covid culture is a culture of waiting. “Well, Mr. Batson, due to the Covid outbreak we’re not able to get the parts in anymore.” Whether it’s an exercise bike, wooden pickets for a common fence, or car parts for repair, you’re going to have to get used to waiting in the Covid culture.

And then all the defendants waiting for their day in court because in many places the Covid crisis has shut down the judicial system. Due to Covid, you’ll be behind bars until.... (Jenni Bergal, “Pause leaves ‘a lot of people sitting in jail’,” amarillo.com, 12/9/2020; article originally published in *Stateline*, an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts).

The psalmist knew something about waiting.

Psalm 130:5-6

I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope.
My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen for the morning;
Indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning.

In Psalm 130, the psalmist is waiting for the Lord's forgiving love. In the beginning of the psalm, out of the depths of sorrow and sin, he cries to the Lord: "O God, hear my voice. And Lord, if you should mark iniquities, who would be able to stand before you? But there is forgiveness with You, O God."

The psalmist is crying out of the depths – the depths of despair, the depths of distress, the depths of depression.

But he is waiting (v. 5). His soul waits.

And it's God's word – that's where he finds his hope, like that watchman who is assigned to stand on the wall and long for the sunrise of the morning, knowing that his shift is over and the city is safe. The sunlight brings hope that the darkness has evaporated and all is well.

More than the watchman on the wall who looks, waits, and yearns for tomorrow, I wait. A lot of us, right now, can relate to that watchman on the wall who yearns not for yesterday but for tomorrow, to be assured everything is okay.

Waiting is that hard time. Waiting for the results of the medical test, the biopsy. "Surely they'll call today. What time do you think the doctor's office closes? If they got the report, they would call, wouldn't they? Let me check my medical portal one more time to see if it's been posted."

Like ancient Israel waiting for the arrival of her Messiah, the psalmist is waiting. "My soul waits for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning."

Oh, I bet you've wrestled with the demons of the darkness and waited for the morning more than once on your restless bed.

The psalmist is waiting for something large enough to re-shape his whole life. (John Vannorsdall, "Waiting," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XLIV, No. 1, Advent 2020)

Ever lost electricity just when you need it the most? It happened this Thanksgiving Day in some of our neighborhoods, including a portion of Sleepy Hollow. What if the turkey is already in the oven and the power gets shut off for a couple of hours? Do you toss it out? Can you heat it back up? What do you with a half-baked bird on Thanksgiving Day?

You wonder how many times people checked their texts and emails to find out when the energy company was expecting the power to be restored on Thanksgiving Day. How long will it be?

The pre-eminent question on ancient Israel's mind: "How long will it be until Messiah, until the joy that comes with Messiah?"

Waiting on the Lord is not like ordinary waiting, is it? It's waiting for that event that absolutely transforms everything. Changes everything. Demands everything. Delivers everything. Waiting on the one event, on that one person, the Messiah-moment that creates the possibility of something new.

As Lutheran pastor John Vannorsdall, once chaplain at Yale, said, “Waiting for the Lord is like waiting for some astonishing news to greet us in the morning.” That morning discovery that changes everything – like during the night, even though it wasn’t found in the forecast, a blizzard dumps ten inches of snow on the plains of West Texas, and everything is closed that day. No school. No shop. And all of a sudden, you have the gift of a day to do all the things you wished you had a day to do. Life has to be reoriented when a blizzard bombards you.

A surprise in the morning – waiting, waiting for that thing that changes everything.

Or it could be like waiting on something that is global. Like war. Waiting for a war to begin or end. Those who can remember the feelings around World War II know about what I speak. The war itself gathered everybody up and called Americans to be concerned for one another’s sons and daughters. All of a sudden, people were talking with deep compassion to other folks they had never met. Like waiting for that kind of war time, where lives are changed and whole societies become supportive – and nothing much is ever the same again, at least for a time. “WAR OVER. Troops Headed Home.”

Like waiting for war and peace, we wait on the Lord.

Christmas brings all that together, doesn’t it? To wait for Christmas is to wait for the Lord. Advent is our preparation for His arrival. The Lord of Christmas is the One for whom we wait. We wait for the Lord who was before we were. The Lord who knows the world from its birth and is not intimidated by its great size or plethora of problems. The God who will not stay away, despite the fact that this peopled sphere went wrong from the beginning, from the first bite of the forbidden fruit to the present day, with every sorry act of selfishness, destruction, and hate.

More than the watchman waiting for the morning, the one with night duty who can’t wait to see the sunrise, we wait for the Christ of Christmas.

Turn over from Psalm 130 to Luke 2:8.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the field and keeping watch – there’s our watchmen – over their flock by night.

The flock that was being tended is close to the city of Bethlehem. Perhaps these sheep were headed to Jerusalem to be used as a sacrifice in the temple. Darkness had already descended, and the shepherds took turns standing guard over the flock. Thieves, hungry beasts – both forever lurking in the shadows of the night.

As the shepherds watch and wait for the morning, an angel of the Lord suddenly stands before them, the glory of the Lord shines around them, and they are absolutely terrified. Darkness instantly defeated by transcendent light. And the first words out of the mouth of the angel are “Fear not,” which tells you the shepherds were frozen with fear.

Fear not, because you have been waiting for joy, and I’m bringing you joy. “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all people everywhere.”

Don't be frightened. I'm the messenger of good news. The waiting is over. Your journey has, at last, arrived at joy. And not just for you, but all people, everywhere.

All of life is captured in the image of waiting through the night. The watchman on the wall, standing guard over the city, longing for the first rays of the sun over the landscape. God's people, ancient Israel, living in darkness and waiting for the moment of the Messiah.

We are waiting, and it won't be long. The Messiah will be born. And though we once joined the people who cry out, "How long must we wait until we see the coming of the Promised One, the hope of the ages fulfilled," He will, at last, be here. The waiting for joy, the waiting for Jesus the Savior will be over.

Notice what the angel says. "For today in the city of Bethlehem there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." **Savior** – the one who saves from all dangers, the one who saves from sin and death, the one who gives blessedness in the full sense of the word. **Christ the Lord**, meaning "the Anointed One," the prophet, the priest, the king, the Messiah who is, at last, God in the flesh.

Good news of great joy. The waiting is almost over.

You're an expecting young mother. The due date has arrived, and yet the baby has not. And so you wait. And you wonder, "Is today the day for the delivery." The spare bedroom has been painted. The crib assembled. The thank-you cards written. And you wait – wait the arrival of that little baby that is going to change everything forever.

And Israel had been waiting on the birth of a baby boy that would be like no other ever born, for he would be God's anointed. And later we learn He would be God Himself. A creator clothed in flesh.

And oh, yeah, the angel said, "Don't look for trumpets to blare or for the infant to be placed in a palace. No royal robes for this infant king. He'll have hand-me-down clothes and be placed in a feeding trough."

The distinguishing sign of the birth of the Son of God will be hand-me-down clothes and a feeding trough. When God writes a story, the narrative always takes the strangest turns.

And yet, Herod will shake in his boots because a baby king – a real Jewish king from David's descendants – has been born.

And lest we think that angel was alone that evening, suddenly the sky is filled with a heavenly host, doing what all creation should do – praising Creator, praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

Some of you are waiting today. Every year, at this time of year, we begin to wait on the Bethlehem Baby. Why some kids even count down the days by opening paper doors on calendars filled with chocolate. We wait because of the hope that He brings, because we're waiting on joy.

Some of us are waiting on this baby to be born because his birth tells us that it's okay for the one that we love to die. For this baby will die too, and then He will rise again and invite us to journey with Him – both to the cross and to the glory of the resurrection. And when He gets here, we will know that it's okay. Death, the enemy is defeated, and we don't have to be afraid anymore.

Some of you wait for that baby for the forgiveness of sin, to know that the deeds done yesterday are forgotten, forgiven, and you can – yes – begin again.

Some of us need the baby to come this Covid Christmas, to know that we're going to be okay, that there will be joy again at the end of this nightmarish journey called “pandemic” – that even in our worst nightmare, the Messiah will still come and journey with us. We can't do this without Him here.

The days of December are days of expectancy. A time of waiting on the baby, of waiting on joy. So when you're busy cooking the extra confections – remember it's because the baby is coming. When you're busy trimming the tree – remember it's because the baby is coming. When you're out buying gifts and trying to decipher what to get your grandmother – remember it's because the baby is going to be born.

And when He is born, the waiting for joy is over.

God, we need You now like never before. We are scared and scarred, divided and downcast, fearful and forgotten, tired and troubled. God, we feel weak and we worry, we are lonely and loath another evening alone. We are shut-in or shut-out, but on either side of the equation we cannot exchange the healthy hugs that assure us we are remembered.

And so, you see, God, we are left waiting for the miracle the birth of the Messiah will bring.

We will not leave our post. No, like the watchmen on the wall waiting for the first rays of the sun peeking over the horizon, we long for the first sights and sounds of Christmas that remind us that – at just the right time – the Messiah will arrive to walk beside us.

He will multiply the manna,
turn the water into wine,
walk on the water, call the dead forth from the grave,
offer forgiveness when the mobs are ready to stone us,
and tell us we can start all over again.

Exercising power over both sin and death, He will invite us to a banquet, telling us to take a seat at the party that lasts forever.

He will call us to obedience and humility, turning us into grace receivers and grace givers.

And on sandals that we are unworthy to tie, he will walk beside us, become weary with us, and wash the traveling dust from our feet. He will sit beside us at a well and tell us everything about us, because He knows us better than we know ourselves.

Finally, He will die for us and with us so that we might also live – forever live – with Him. On our journey to Emmaus at Easter, He will teach us, beginning with Moses' books about how all the prophets have pointed to Him – to this very hour when we wait no longer because joy comes in the morning.

“Is the train here yet?” Yes, indeed, I hear the whistle blowing at a distance. Good news of great joy is coming down the tracks.

Let us pray.