

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE STEWARDSHIP OF WAITING”
Mark 1:1-8
December 7, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services**

Like children, we sometimes wonder why we have to wait for the things we want, especially from God. Why does God not respond to our prayers? Often the reason is that God knows we are not ready to receive what we are waiting for. Like a good parent, God is loving and patient. God knows when we are ready.

In the times when we are waiting for God to act or to respond, we must ask what God would have us do. The work of God's kingdom is often done in times of waiting. While we wait for God's unfolding purposes we will have many opportunities to do God's will.

God always sends messengers to prepare the people for what God is about to do. Preparation for what is coming is important, even if we do not know when it will come. There is always a voice calling us to get our lives in order and prepare for the coming of the Lord.

How do you feel about the time you spend in waiting rooms? We all find ourselves there, more and more often as we grow older. If you don't like the waiting room, consider the alternative of spending all that time standing in line! But however comfortable the seating and fresh the magazines, we do not like to wait. Time is money. We have places to go and things to do. We invented **“fast food”** and can't see why everything can't be instant. The challenges of waiting, however, may never be more intense than in these weeks before Christmas. Yet, ironically, Christmas calls on us to rediscover something of the wisdom we have lost in our unwillingness to wait.

Children can be excused for their difficulties with waiting. This is a characteristic of the immature. Adults should be able to do a bit better. Biblical faith is not for the immature, because it is full of waiting. The people of Israel were in bondage in Babylon and longed for deliverance. The prophet assured them that God had not forgotten them and would intervene on their behalf. The prophet said, ***“In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God.”*** Israel’s prophets announced the coming of God, but not God’s ETA. They uttered the promise and invited the people to wait in faithfulness and anticipation.

Mark’s Gospel picks up the theme. Centuries later the people are back in their own land, but they are still not free. Their homeland has been conquered by the Roman Empire. Once more they long for deliverance. There appears in the desert an eccentric, roughhewn prophet, echoing the familiar words of Isaiah of old, ***“Make ready the way of the Lord, clear him a straight path.”*** This prophet’s name is John. Some think he is the promised Messiah, but he says one more powerful than he is to come. ***“I am not the Messiah,”*** he said, ***“but he is coming.”*** Once more the people waited. This time they did not have long to wait. The Messiah came. But he was not what they people expected. They wanted a leader with a sword and with his hair on fire! Finally the people rejected him. Those who believed and followed him soon discovered that their waiting was not over. In 2 Peter we read, ***“We await new heavens and a new earth where the justice of God will reside.”***

When we are waiting, it seems to us as if nothing else is going on. We are preoccupied with our waiting and the whole cosmos becomes a waiting room. It is a presumptuous perspective, putting us at the center. Our waiting, no matter how important, is not all that is happening. Think of it, most things in the world happen while we are waiting for something else. While we are waiting for the light to change, a world of intricate subconscious processes are going on in the driver’s head, as well as under the hood.

Often things are happening that bear directly or indirectly on what we are waiting for. There are no shortcuts to a harvest or the birth of a child or a work of architecture. Impatience in such things is always foolish and often sheer folly. It is not by chance that wisdom and patience walk hand in hand. Waiting is a human necessity. The willingness to wait is the mark of human

maturity. Biblical waiting, however, has yet another indispensable aspect. There is the *stewardship* of waiting. What use can we make of those times when we must wait? What possibilities are present in our waiting rooms that we have not seen? Can waiting be transformed into productivity, into creativity, into compassionate service?

Prison may be the world's quintessential waiting room. It is certainly *imposed* waiting - - rarely chosen, except by the Gandhis of the world to strike a blow. Yet some of the world's greatest literature has been written in prison, which supports the idea that insecurity can be creative, that suffering can be redemptive. Is anything achieved without struggle? Aren't we often at our miraculous best when the pressure is most overwhelming? Consider how often the most devastating turn of events reveals the most admirable qualities in a person, of nobility, of sympathy, of aspiration. In nineteenth-century England two of the greatest minds of the time, and of history, were John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle. Despite their significant philosophical and temperamental differences, they became good friends. Their friendship survived one of the most catastrophic incidents in the history of literature. In a kitchen fire, Mill's household maid accidentally burned the only manuscript of Carlyle's history of the French Revolution! Carlyle discovered sufficient magnanimity within himself for forgiveness. But he also coped with the loss by realizing he would rather have adventure of rewriting than the fleeting experience of publication.

“The Station,” an essay once written Robert Hastings, imagines a trip by rail across the continent as a parable of how we approach life. **“Out the windows we watch the passing scenery - - cars on a nearby highway, cattle grazing on a distant hillside, flatlands and mountains, valleys and rolling hills. But uppermost in our minds is the final destination. On a certain day at a certain hour we will pull into the station. Once we get there our dreams will come true, and the pieces of our lives will fall into place.”** But eventually we must realize that such a destination is only a dream. The joy of life is in the trip itself - - the scenery, your fellow passengers. **“Life must be lived as we go along. The station is only a dream.”**

We are in Advent, one of faith's seasons of waiting. The prophet Isaiah calls forth: **“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”** The prophet John the Baptist

declares, “*One more powerful than I is to come after me.*” And once more the people of God are waiting.

Of all human responsibilities, what is more important or comprehensive than the stewardship of time? Each of us has time in limited supply and none of us knows how much we will have. Times of waiting need not be wasted time. The person of faith can use times of waiting redemptively - - to work, to pray, and to rest.

As humans, we live within time. God is eternal and the Creator of time. God does not measure time as we do. We must not question God’s timing but trust in God’s wisdom and love. I encourage you to live in the promise of Christ’s ultimate victory, because I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.