



WAITING

trust in the slow work of God

Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

In our Western society, we hate having to wait. At the supermarket, deciding which lane will be the shortest, you make a choice, and it turns out to be the wrong one. All the other lanes are moving much faster. *Shall I swap? If only I'd chosen the other lane; now I've got to wait.* Or you are driving, stopped at a red light that's been red for ages, and then it goes to green, but the car in front doesn't seem to have noticed. *O come on!* Or at the airport, you look at the board for your flight and see the dreaded word, "DELAYED." *O no, I've got to wait another hour!*

We hate to wait. We want everything *now*. *Buy now, pay later.* We can touch a button and have light, music, TV, instantly. Online shopping allows us to buy what we want when we want, and shipping speeds above one or two days seem impossible to endure. Food is no longer seasonal, but readily available at all times. Even relationships are now formed or lost in an instant. On Facebook we can make a friend at the touch of a button and – more sinister – we can unfriend someone in an instant.

All good things come to those who wait, my mother used to say to my brothers, sister, and me. When she did, we all would groan and complain. But now that I'm older, I think she was right. Waiting is countercultural; it's radical; and it's true.

If you have lost touch with the wisdom of waiting in your life, I believe you've lost touch with part of your soul. Scripture is shot through with the power and wisdom of waiting. God, it seems, *likes* us to wait. For if

we never allow ourselves to spend time waiting – waiting patiently, even when it’s boring or annoying – if we always insist on getting what we want instantly, we are doomed to a life of superficiality. When we have to wait, however frustrating and uncomfortable we might find it, we are actually opening ourselves up to God, and to God’s work within us. God likes us to wait, because when we are waiting, we become vulnerable to God’s Spirit slowly changing us, forming us, and helping us to grow.

This is why I love the story of the Exodus: how God led the Hebrew people out of bondage in Egypt and through the desert to the Promised Land. To get from Egypt to Judah on foot would have taken maybe a week or so. Yet it took the Israelites forty years – a whole generation! It wasn’t because they kept losing their way; it was because God *wanted* them to wait. During that time of waiting God was forming them, molding them into God’s own people. Without that time of waiting, they could not enter the Promised Land. I believe the same is true for us.

“O tarry, and await the Lord’s pleasure,” we read in the Psalms. “*Be strong, and he shall comfort your heart. Wait patiently for the Lord*” (Ps 27:18). The Psalmists knew that God’s time is not our time, and that the deepest, truest gifts from God come when we wait patiently for them. “*I waited patiently upon the Lord: he stooped to me and heard my cry*” (Ps 40:1).

The waiting that is commended to us is a particular kind of waiting; it’s not like waiting for the bus! The key comes in Psalm 130: “*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits for him – in his word is my hope*” (v.4). *Hope* is the key. When we wait for the Lord – when in our prayers our souls in silence wait – then we wait *in hope*. The Spanish word *esperar* means both “to wait” and “to hope.” This is how we are to wait: in hope and trust and confidence that God is answering our prayer; that God is slowly and silently working in us, changing us, forming us, converting us, working miracles in us.

It’s probably in our darkest moments, when nothing seems to be happening and when we feel most anxious, that – silently and mysteriously – God is at work. “*For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him*” (Ps. 62:6).

In my own experience of waiting, I find these words by the Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin helpful:

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability –
and that it may take a very long time.*

You may be right now in a place of darkness, anxiety, or indecision. Perhaps you have to make a choice, a decision about a job or a relationship. Perhaps you just feel confused or unsure about the future. If you are feeling frustrated that you can't see clearly, or if nothing seems to be happening, or if you're feeling stuck, offer all that to God in your prayers.

Trust in the slow work of God. Something *is* happening, something deep and mysterious. Wait in hope. The time will come when you will see, when you will know, and it will be a kind of resurrection. You will know in your own life these wonderful words of Isaiah: *"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"* (Is. 40:31).

Br. Geoffrey Tristram has been a member of SSJE for almost twenty years. He was born in Wales, and before joining the community taught theology in a large English high school, and was then Rector of the parish of Welwyn in Hertfordshire, which is just outside London. He enjoys teaching and preaching, as well as swimming, cycling, traveling, and French literature.

QUOTES *to ponder*

“Waiting on God requires the willingness to bear uncertainty, to carry within oneself the unanswered question, lifting the heart to God about it whenever it intrudes upon one’s thoughts.” – *Elizabeth Elliot*

“‘Wait on the Lord’ is a constant refrain in the Psalms, and it is a necessary word, for God often keeps us waiting. He is not in such a hurry as we are, and it is not his way to give more light on the future than we need for action in the present, or to guide us more than one step at a time. When in doubt, do nothing, but continue to wait on God. When action is needed, light will come.” – *J.I. Packer*

“What we are waiting for is not as important as what happens to us while we are waiting. Trust the process.” – *Mandy Hale*

“Our willingness to wait reveals the value we place on what we’re waiting for...” – *Charles Stanley*

PRACTICES *to try*

Examine your impatience. When you find yourself feeling impatient with having to wait, pause to observe your thoughts and feelings. Why are you feeling impatient in this circumstance? What are you telling yourself about what is happening (or not happening)? Are you blaming someone for having to wait? What assumptions or values are at play? What insight can you gain from this situation?

Practice trusting in God. When you find yourself having to wait, take the opportunity to make an act of faith by declaring your confidence in God and in God’s purposes for your life. Thank God for the delay and ask that God work in you whatever is necessary during this time of waiting.

QUESTIONS *to consider*

When have you had to wait for something that you very much wanted? What was it like to wait patiently for it? What can you learn from your own experience of waiting for something you desired?

What might be some of the positive fruits that come from waiting patiently for something we desire?

Can you recall a figure from the Bible who waited patiently on the Lord? What can he/she teach you?

RESOURCES *to explore*

W.H. Vanstone, The Stature of Waiting (Morehouse: 2006).

Henri J.M. Nouwen, The Path of Waiting (Crossroad: 1995).

A PRAYER *for waiting*

O gracious and holy Father, give us wisdom to perceive you, intelligence to understand you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you, and a life to proclaim you, through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.

– Saint Benedict

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