

Watching and Waiting  
A Sermon for October 30, 2016  
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10  
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

I love the story of Zacchaeus. It says he was a ruler, a rich tax collector. The world labels him a sinner. Zacchaeus seeks out Jesus-- just to catch a glimpse of him. Although the crowds prevent him from seeing Jesus, Zacchaeus perseveres, degrading himself by climbing a sycamore tree.

And even as Zacchaeus is seeking Jesus, we find that Jesus is seeking Zacchaeus. Jesus invites himself over-- in fact he says that he *must* come stay with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus shows himself to be someone who welcomes Jesus with joy, and whose life has been changed to care for the poor rather than to exploit them.

People grumble at Jesus' choice to stay in Zacchaeus' house, but Jesus counters with one of the most delightfully clear and wonderful statements in scripture: The son of man came to seek and save the lost.

This is how we want the story to go. It's such a compact presentation of good news. Children everywhere sing about it. Zacchaeus watches and waits for Jesus to come by, and what seems like a few moments later-- BAM!-- salvation has come to his household.

In this story the good news comes quickly. And that's how we like it. We want instant gratification.

We want the world to be full of Zacchaeuses-- people whose lives change dramatically and quickly. People who stop exploiting the poor and who start serving the poor. And if we find ourselves seeking Jesus, we don't want to have to endure too much sycamore tree. Hopefully Jesus notices us quickly and we can quit the waiting game.

Zacchaeus receives his salvation quickly. But Habakkuk, the prophet who lived some 600 years before Jesus--- he and his generation will have to wait a long time for their circumstances to change. The Babylonians are on their way to destroy Jerusalem and take its people into exile. Good news seems far off. Habakkuk and his generation have to wait.

Waiting. Who's got the time for it? And as soon as we talk about waiting, we talk about the virtue that we all love to hate: patience. Growing up, whenever my family would find ourselves in a situation where we had to do more waiting than we'd bargained for, someone would inevitably ask accusingly, "Did somebody pray for patience or something!?"

In fact, if you want to bring out the worst in someone, make them wait when they want to be in a hurry. Have you ever been late to a doctor's appointment? Well, I'm going to remind you how it probably went:

Of course, you got a late start-- that maximizes the stress from the beginning..

Then you drive off in your car and you get to your first traffic light. Of course it turned red about 5 seconds too soon for you to make it through.

So you **wait and watch** for the light to turn green.

Only after it turns green do you realize that you need gas, so you pull into the gas station

You watch and you wait to gas to be done pumping. And then you get on the highway and there are two lanes closed due to construction.

You wait for four lanes to funnel into two. And in the meantime, you're waiting with a whole bunch of people who *also* don't want to be waiting. Usually this is the part where someone with a Jesus Ichthus fish on their tailgate cuts you off.

You finally get to the doctor's office stressed out at being late. And what do you do? You wait for 30 minutes to be seen.

It's easy to see why we like to avoid waiting if at all possible. Waiting is hard. Waiting can be frustrating. At times, waiting can feel hopeless. But there are times in our life where waiting is exactly what we need to do.

Let's think about it in the context of prayer. Prayer is like coming to a traffic light. Sometimes we receive a green light: a clear, positive answer to prayer. We get the job we've prayed for, the positive medical outcome we wanted, or simply our daily bread.

Then again we get a definite red light: a clear, negative answer to prayer. Despite our prayers, the Ravens don't win. Or more to the heart of things: a family member dies. Red lights are hard, but there is a finality to them. We have a place to move on from. We know we can't go that way.

Where I think we have the real trouble, is when we get a blinking yellow light: watch and wait. If we're not careful about how we think about it, it can turn into David Jacobson's rule of grocery store check out:

Whatever line you choose, you chose wrong. You'll have to wait. If you switch lines, you should have stayed, and if you stayed, you should have switched. The yellow blinking light of prayer is like that: you might flail around and try to make it go by faster, but at the end of the day, you just have to wait. You might also need to complain.

I hope you know that the Bible authorizes you to complain to God. Now, I don't want there to be some misunderstanding here, so let me clarify: the Bible authorizes you to complain *to God*. The Bible does not authorize you to complain to *me*.

But complaining to God is a tried and true response of the faithful. We see it all over the Psalms. They're called "Lament Psalms." They say, "How long, Lord!?" God you're able to act. I believe that you're powerful and that you can do all things. So why don't you do something about this right now?

- How long will you forget me, LORD? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13:1)
- How long will the wicked—oh, LORD!— how long will the wicked win? (Psalm 94:3)

When we get the yellow flashing light of prayer, we find ourselves in the same situation as the prophet Habakkuk. We need to complain to God-- "it is not well with my soul... things are not ok with me. Things are not okay with the world." Listen to what Habakkuk says:

LORD, how long will I call for help  
and you not listen?  
I cry out to you, "Violence!"  
but you don't deliver us.  
Why do you show me injustice  
and look at anguish  
so that devastation and violence  
are before me?  
There is strife, and conflict abounds.  
4 Your Instruction is ineffective.  
Justice does not endure  
because the wicked  
surround the righteous.  
Justice becomes warped. (1:2-4)

Our reading then skips the rest of chapter one, which is God's initial answer to Habakkuk's complaint. Habakkuk isn't satisfied with it though, so he returns to God in prayer, seeking salvation from the invading forces of the Babylonians. Habakkuk says

I will take my post;  
I will position myself on the fortress.  
I will keep watch to see  
what the Lord says to me  
and how he will respond  
to my complaint. (2:1).

And when God's word comes, it's essentially a blinking yellow light. God says, "I hear you, but not yet. Wait." This is the response:

...the message is a witness to what is decreed;  
it gives reliable testimony about how matters will turn out.  
**Even if the message is not fulfilled right away, wait patiently;  
for it will certainly come to pass—it will not arrive late. (2:3**

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This is how it works: God gives us a vision for what the future looks like. God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven. Salvation will come. Those who oppress the poor will be dealt with. But not yet. You need to wait.

But how do we wait? Do we get the yellow blinking light and just kick back? No! We get to work.

I want to offer three ways that we get to work while we wait:

**First**, we get to work by spreading the message in word and in deed. God told Habakkuk to write the vision down to spread the word about what God was going to do. The Babylonians are coming and there is no stopping it. But those who remain faithful will live. Spread the word. Write it down so that it can be carried by heralds, posted on billboards.

Our message is that Kingdom of God is coming on earth. We have the vision of Revelation chapter 21. Jesus will return and live among us. He will wipe away every tear. There will be no more death. There will be no more mourning, crying, or pain. And that those who remain faithful through the ordeals to come will inherit these things.

Our message is that the life of the Kingdom of God is available here and now. By God's grace and the salvation offered through Jesus Christ, it is possible to be changed. We can be people who change our hearts and our lives-- just as Zaccheaus did. God can empower us to love God and neighbor and so to fulfill everything that God commands.

We wait faithfully by spreading the news through our words and our actions.

The **second** thing we do is to sow seeds by praying. God's Kingdom is not yet here in its fullness. But Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come." I'm always amazed when I think about this: It is not inevitable that God's Kingdom come. We have a responsibility to pray it in. Does that mean we bring the kingdom? No! Whenever God answers a prayer it's God acting, not us. We can't take credit for answered prayer. God brings the kingdom. But graciously and mysteriously God has involved us in the process.

Jesus teaches us to pray for it. Jesus appoints us to be people who sow seeds for the kingdom of God by praying.

Now, when you plant a seed, you don't immediately expect it to spring up. It always takes time. It takes water and sunshine. But mostly it takes patient waiting. Sowing seeds is work. But we know that in due season, the seed will sprout.

This type of waiting is totally different from your wait at the doctor's office. It's a purpose-filled waiting. It's like waiting for a pregnancy to come to term.

We wait by praying, and praying teaches us to wait.

This brings me to my third way that we get to work while we wait for God to act: we call out and name the seeds that are sprouting. Habakkuk proclaims in chapter 2 verse 14 that one day,

the earth will be filled

with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,

as the waters cover the sea.

One day all of the seeds that have been sown all over the earth will sprout up, and the earth will be *full* of the knowledge that God reigns.

Until that point, we point out where the kingdom is springing up.

I want to close with another story from the Bible that illustrates this third point.

The great prophet Elijah lived when Ahab was King of Israel was leading Israel to worship idols. Elijah declared by the power of God that there would be no rain in the land until he gave word. In the third year of the drought, according to 1 Kings chapter 18, God told Elijah that he was going to bring the rain again. The rain does not come immediately. Elijah must confront the prophets of Baal-- the false god. Elijah must remain faithful through an incredible trial.

He meets with the priests of Baal. They are each to set up an altar. Elijah says, "Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." In a powerful story for another day, Baal is helpless, because baal is an idol, but the Lord is victorious.



The rain has not yet come, but Elijah says he hears the sound of rushing rain. And so Elijah goes to the top of Mt. Carmel and he bows down and prays. This is how it continues in verse 43:

He said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.”  
He went up and looked, and said, “There is nothing.”

Then he said, “Go again seven times.”  
At the seventh time he said,

**“Look, a little cloud no bigger than a [man’s] hand is rising out of the sea.”**

Then he said, “Go say to Ahab, ‘Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’ ”

In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain.

Elijah declares his confidence in the truth of God’s message: God is going to bring the rain. But Elijah doesn’t just wait for the rain to come, he kneels down and prays. He watches for a cloud to form on the horizon. There is nothing. He keeps praying. Again, nothing. Then, Nothing, nothing, and nothing. But then his servant comes back and says “I see a cloud the size of man’s hand.”

The rain hasn’t come yet, but he sees the cloud on the horizon, so he names it. Then he says go tell Ahab he’s about to get wet.

I don’t know where you are right now. But perhaps you’re in a season of waiting on God. You’re working and you’re praying. You’re watching

and you're waiting. You're sowing seeds but you haven't yet seen the fruit. You're praying for rain but there isn't a cloud on the horizon.

Keep on praying. Keep on waiting for sound of the rushing rain. Keep on watching. Watch for the the cloud the size of a man's hand. You keep getting that yellow flashing light? Keep praying until you see that cloud the size of a man's hand. It might not be the fullness of what you hope for, but it's a sign that the fullness is coming. Watch for God to act.