



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Wait of the World

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ OCTOBER 1, 2017

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Romans 8:18-25 (NIV)

I had to meet someone who was arriving at the airport, and the flight tracker said they were going to land early. I had gotten caught up in a task and lost track of the time, so when I finally got in my car I knew I needed to hurry to get there. I wanted to be there just as they arrived at baggage claim. I hate to be late. I was idling at a stoplight, the third car back. It was one of those lights that were timed by somebody in the traffic department who had no clue about the reality of our roads. We sat there for what seemed like five minutes, while the light was green on the cross street (which had hardly any traffic). Finally our light turned green. And the guy a few cars in

front of me just sat there (he must have been texting or something). After counting to five, I was ready to lean on the horn with all my might. And then, suddenly, the verse of scripture I had read that morning and was attempting to memorize popped into my mind: Romans 8:25. “But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” My hand froze. “Wait for it **patiently**.” I was not feeling patient at that moment. And I was not in any mood to wait. But that’s what the Bible says. (Don’t you hate it when that happens? Just as you’re about to do something that feels entirely natural and even good, a verse of scripture pops into your mind and stops you in your tracks.)

It is not easy for any of us to wait. In fact, we hate to wait. Nobody is born with a natural disposition and aptitude for patience. I’ve known people who are born with some phenomenal abilities: people who, from their youngest years, are naturally gifted in music; people who have an eye and an inborn skill for drawing or creating other art; people who are whizzes at math; people who have remarkable natural hand-eye coordination. But I’ve never met a person with the “Patience Gene.” It is a learned behavior for all of us. And it gets even harder to develop in this very impatient, I-want-it-now, instant-gratification society. Patience may well be the hardest of all the classical virtues to practice in the 21st century.

I’ve found myself drawn the last couple weeks to re-reading some of the stories in the Bible of people who found themselves in storms. (I wonder why that was on my mind!) One of them is the account of the 12 disciples who found themselves in a storm-tossed boat on a turbulent sea late one night. Finally, after several hours of toil and anxiety, Jesus showed up in a rather dramatic way: walking across the water to them. When He arrived, He calmed the storm and everything was okay. But He did not come to them instantly, at the very first breeze of the brewing storm. It was hours into the tempest. He required them to wait—and in doing so, to learn some powerful spiritual lessons. Waiting periods can be powerful teachers.

The Apostle Paul, in our text from Romans chapter 8, takes up this most unpopular but necessary topic of learning how to wait patiently. He uses the comparison to the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Every parent here has had to learn about waiting in that context. An expectant mom might be highly uncomfortable, and might wish very much to get that baby out of her right now. But you can't rush the process. The baby has his or her own timetable.

Life brings so many other opportunities for us to learn how to wait. We may need to wait for a big milestone, like graduation or a wedding day. We may have to wait for our bodies to heal from surgery or an illness. We may have to wait for the healing process to happen in our emotions, after we have lost someone we love. Though it's hard to do, we can't always force things to happen according to our preferred schedule. And the eternal God, for some reason, doesn't seem to be governed by the tyranny of time as we are. The Old Testament says "a thousand years are like a day" to Him (Psalm 90:4).

Some of the great preachers and writers through the centuries of Christian faith have addressed this topic of patience and spoken of it eloquently. In our own times, Presbyterian pastor John Ortberg has offered us these insights: "Waiting means that we give God the benefit of the doubt that He knows what He's doing." It's a constant temptation for us to second-guess the Lord of all creation, and to naively think that we know better than He does, or that if we'd been in charge things would have gone better. But that is just an expression of our foolishness and our limited abilities to understand. When we embrace the teaching of Romans 8, and the wisdom of John Ortberg, we are reminded that God really does know what He's doing—far better than we do. And John Ortberg also comments, "When we wait for something, we recognize that we are not in control." Naturally we like to pull the strings, to call the shots. But there are things far bigger than we are. Though it may at first be frustrating to recognize that only God knows and can control the events of our life, when we make peace with that truth it can actually give us a sense of security.

Waiting on the Lord is not just a form of laziness, nor is it passive resignation. To wait for God does not mean we do **nothing**. There are likely things we can and should be doing, even while we wait for prayers to be answered or God's guidance to be made clear or His healing power to do its work. And we need to recognize when God provides answers that are different than what we'd expected. The storm-weary disciples were praying that the wind would die down; they did not anticipate what Jesus chose to do to answer their prayers. Learning to trust Him and receive from Him is a lesson of faith that we will probably never master perfectly. But we can keep on re-learning it, in each new situation of patient waiting.

He's a naturally brilliant man, born into a poor village in Nigeria, who worked his way through medical school in his own country and then applied and was granted a one-year residency program at the University of Washington in epidemiology. As he learned the culture of the U.S.A. while mastering his specialty, he felt God's nudging him to pursue further medical training. I just finished his biography (*Truth Doesn't Have a Side*). His name is Dr. Bennet Omalu. He has done ground-breaking work in forensic neuro-pathology, and was the expert who first discovered and diagnosed the medical effects of head trauma in pro football players: CTE, or chronic traumatic encephalopathy. (Some of you have seen the film *Concussion* starring Will Smith, based on his story.) Dr. Omalu had become a Christian through the influence of missionaries and a church in his homeland of Nigeria, and coming to America to practice medicine was something he felt was absolutely led and guided by God.

As his one-year program in Seattle was drawing to a close, he applied for residencies in pathology. If he wasn't successful in landing one, his visa would expire and he would have to return to Africa. The process of applying for medical residencies is an unusual one in the academic world: final-year med students apply to programs, and then they all receive word of their placement on Match Day in March. Dr. Omalu was devastated to learn on Match Day that he didn't receive a single offer.

That night in his room he began packing to depart the U.S. His soul was crushed. He poured out his disappointment to the Lord. *How could you lead me here, God, only to desert me?* Though it's not what grown men like to admit, he acknowledges that he cried. He saw no solution. About 3 AM, a ray of hope shown through his gloom. He decided to pray this: "God, I do believe and trust You. I know You love me, and that all things are possible with You. If it is not your will for me to continue my medical training in America, You must have something better for me." He then fell into a deep sleep.

At 6:30 AM his phone jarred him awake. It was a doctor from Columbia University Hospital in New York calling. Dr. Omalu had been their second choice for the pathology residency, and they had just heard a moment before that their first choice had declined. The offer was now his, if he wanted it. In shock, he said "Yes" and hung up the phone. It was a life-changing and career-redirecting moment. But most important is how it impacted his faith. As he writes in his autobiography:

I felt God saying to me at that moment, "Bennet, life is a struggle. My Son struggled, but He never wavered. You must not waver in your trust in Me. Though my ways may be different and my timing not the same as yours, I will never leave you or forsake you. Keep on fighting the good fight and running the good race. You cannot tire until your final breath, when you will rest eternally as I call you home."

During our time of communion together with the Lord in the next few minutes, this might be the perfect opportunity for someone here to have an intimate and honest talk with the Lord, as Dr. Omalu did. Maybe you're in a waiting time in your life. Maybe it's hard for you to see where God is in your personal situation. Maybe you're getting impatient and your faith is wavering. Listen again to Paul's words in Romans: "If we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

