

What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do – 3. When You Have to Wait

Luke 24:13-21, 27-32

May 7, 2023

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For people just waiting.
Waiting for a train to go
or a bus to come, or a plane to go
or the mail to come, or the rain to go
or the phone to ring or the snow to snow
or waiting around for a yes or a no
or waiting for their hair to grow.
Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for the fish to bite
or waiting for wind to fly a kite
or waiting around for Friday night
or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake
or a pot to boil, or a better break
or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants
or a wig with curls, or another chance.
Everyone is just waiting.

That's from the Dr. Seuss book, *Oh the Place You'll Go*. It's so true, right? Everyone is waiting for something. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for Mr./Mrs. Right. Waiting for a new king to be crowned. Waiting for war to end, gun violence to stop or the world to change. You might be waiting for something you know God is leading you to or it might be that you have no idea where you are going, and you need some guidance. Regardless of what we're waiting for, waiting is hard. I know for me, in those seasons of waiting, in my impatience, I wake each day thinking, "Maybe today is the day." But in those long seasons of waiting, each day is the same as the day before. That dream that once seemed so certain now seems just out of reach. And the waiting seems so much harder when I know it was something God had brought me to and yet there is a hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear, "Wait. Look, but don't go in. Not yet."

In the fall of 1989, Jerry was offered his dream job as director of the University of Michigan Marching Band. Jerry grew up just outside of Ann Arbor, Michigan, attended the University of Michigan (the other U of M) and marched in the Michigan Marching Band. So, when the university called and offered him a one-year interim position, he jumped at the chance. And it was a magical year.....but we knew it would only last a year.

That spring, now having another year of college teaching experience, Jerry began applying for a full-time college marching band positions. That was a long season of waiting in which he turned down three teaching positions because we didn't feel like that was the next right step for Jerry or for our family. And so as spring turned to summer, we continued to wait.

Finally, in June, Jerry accepted a position at the University of Texas and by August 1, we had moved our little family to Austin, TX. Jerry began his work with the Longhorn Band, but I also needed to work to make ends meet. For weeks, I would comb through the *Austin American Statesman* newspaper in search of a music ministry job at a United Methodist Church. For weeks, I looked and prayed and found nothing. We were hesitant to start attending church

because we were holding out hopes of me finding a job in the church and becoming a part of that faith community. Meanwhile, 3 days a week, as I drove our son, Mark, to preschool - I drove right past a United Methodist Church. After weeks of feeling spiritually depleted -- we decided that we just needed to start going to church. So we went to Tarrytown UMC that day, and found a vibrant, multi-generational, warm and welcoming congregation much like Messiah Church. It was in a conversation after worship that I learned that they were looking for a Children's and Youth Choir Director. I was hired that week and remained on staff until we moved three years later. See, while I was waiting for a job, God knew that what we needed was a faith community.

We are in week three of our series *What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do*. Jesus tells us, that in this life we will have trouble. But what do we do when we don't know which way to turn, how to get out of the dark places and how to respond when God is telling us something? While the answer is not always clear, that in Christ, there is always a way. So far in this series, we've explored what to do when you're struggling with where God is leading you. You know what you're supposed to do but you just don't want to do it. Then last week, Pastor Bethany helped us think about what to do in those times or seasons in life when we need to figure out how to listen to the voices around us. And today, we're going to give some thought and attention to what to do when we just must wait. We've all had those times in life when we just don't know what to do and we find ourselves having to wait for direction. In those times, Jesus calls us to get back to the basics. He calls us to come to the table of grace, to find him in the community.

If you've ever taken a road trip with kids you know that they often ask, "Are we there yet?" As adults, we usually know the answer. We know where we're going and how to get there. Yet, we don't give the answer instantly. Often, Jesus doesn't give us the answers to our questions right away, either.

Psalm 119 says, *Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*. I think of life as this path on which we are walking and we have this lamp, the light of the world. It illuminates the area just in front of us, our feet, and our next steps. If we were to see the end of the journey, we might say, "No way. I am not going there." or it might be so exciting that we rush ahead and miss the joy of the journey. Jesus doesn't give us the answers to all of life's questions right way. So, my question for you today is what answer are you waiting for? It might be that you find yourself waiting for something exciting, like a new job, a graduation, a new relationship, or a new baby to arrive. Maybe you're waiting for directions or guidance on a decision. Or maybe you are waiting for an uncertain medical diagnosis, a challenging conversation, or for a loved one to take their last breath. Whatever you find yourself waiting for today, write it down.. And then a little later, when you come forward to receive communion, bring your card with you and leave it in one of the baskets. Leave it at Jesus' feet recognizing that communion can be a turning point in our lives, a new beginning and a place where we find Jesus. Where we find the answers to life's questions and problems together, in Jesus.

Earlier this year, we spent a lot of time learning that the central theme in Luke's gospel is that God's grace is for everyone. And in today's scripture reading, we see how that grace works through the community of the church as we revisit the story of the two disciples, Cleopas and Mary but from a little different angle.

They were walking back to their hometown of Emmaus and pondering the events surrounding Jesus' death. Out of nowhere, Jesus appeared and walked alongside them, but they did not recognize him, even when he interpreted the scriptures about himself. This interpretation helped them understand things they could not understand before Jesus' death. But they had to wait for

the right moment for it all to make sense. It is only when they invited this “mystery man” for table fellowship that Jesus broke the bread and blessed it, did they recognize who he was. Communion was then and is now a special place where Jesus’ presence is made known to us. It has always been understood as the spiritual food for the journey of life. In this life, as we are searching to find answers for our questions, Jesus strengthens us during our struggle, especially as we come together in community.

But I still scratch my head when I think about just how blind Cleopas and Mary were. They were lamenting about everything that was wrong, how their plans didn’t fit God’s and yet they were oblivious to the fact that the Savior of the world, the Messiah, the Hope for every heart was walking right alongside them, listening and engaged, wanting to know their thoughts. I think, if truth be told, we all have a little bit of Cleopas and Mary in us. I know I do. As I think back to my job-hunting experience in Austin, I realize how I was walking on my own Emmaus Road, fussing, and obsessing about God not doing things my way and, in the process, I totally missed the point. I was busy dwelling on my own disappointments and laments that I was missing the main event.

This story of Cleopas and Mary helps us to see that in our waiting, there is a blessedness. But when we obsess about the “whys” of our situations, we lose sight of our priorities. Why haven’t I met Mr. Right yet? Why can’t I be free of that difficult person? Why isn’t my life looking the way I thought it would? Why is my marriage in so much turmoil? Why is my health fading? Why are my children walking away from God? Here’s my point. That goal, that dream, that prayer, that waiting is not the next step in the journey. Jesus is the journey. It’s all about Him—knowing Him, loving Him, seeking Him, clinging to Him. But what do we do when that blessed waiting doesn’t feel like such a blessing? Author Tara Johnson offers three tips to help as we wait.

1. Don’t get so caught up in the details that you miss the big picture. How close you stand to something changes your perspective about it. If you’re more closely wrapped up in why your plans aren’t working out, perhaps you need to take a step back. When you stay close to Jesus, the other details grow smaller by comparison. I know for me, when I get overwhelmed with the details, I need space to spend more time in prayer. It was Martin Luther who said, “I have so much to do today that I will spend the first three hours of today.”

2. Things will change. All through the Bible, we find the phrase, “And it came to pass.” We don’t often read, “And so it came to stay. If God is working in the midst of your life, change will certainly come. It may not come when you want it or when you expect it, but when God moves, nothing in heaven or earth can stop God’s plans.

3. Remind yourself that because God is perfect, so is God’s timing. This sounds simplistic but it’s true. If we can trust God with our eternal life, trusting God with the day-to-day stuff should be easy. God sees the big picture and is moving things into place in God’s own time, God’s own way and most importantly for God’s glory.

Some of the greatest figures in the Bible had to wait many years for God’s promises. Everything that happened in the meantime was used to prepare them, inwardly as well as outwardly. Joseph was a slave and in prison for 13 years. Abraham and Sarah waited a long for God to give them children. David waited 15 years to become king. And yet, in Psalm 27 David writes, *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!*

A few months ago, I shared with you that for the last 2 years, there has been a major conflict between two of my family members. And for the past two years, we've been waiting and praying for a reconciliation. Many of you have joined me in that prayer. Just a couple of weeks ago, with a scone in one hand and a Starbucks coffee in the other, one of them broke their silence. It was a gesture of reconciliation and the other accepted it. Our waiting is over. God was at work in our waiting. Their relationship isn't like it was at one time, but it's a start.

So, when it appears that nothing is happening, rest assured, God is using our waiting to change us. God wants us to learn to follow God and put down our demanding, doubtful, and complaining selves. One way God does that is to say "wait". That miserable, uncomfortable, sometimes painful state of silence is one of God's most powerful tools to set us free.

What about you? Can you remember a time when you tried to rush God's timetable? Looking back now, can you see in hindsight some of the advantages and blessings that were found in a time of waiting?

Cleopas and Mary had to wait to know Jesus until he broke bread together with them. The first century community to whom Luke was writing would not have missed the symbolism here. Because two things — Word and sacrament — had to be present for Cleopas and Mary to know Jesus, and for Jesus to deeply know them in return. Wherever you have the Word truly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered there you have the true church of Jesus Christ.

As was true in that tiny village called Emmaus, so it is true here today. Whenever we spend time in God's Word together, and whenever we gather around the Lord's table to break bread — either in person or online — Christ can be counted upon to be present with us. Communion was then and is now a special place where Jesus' presence is made known to us. It has always been understood as the spiritual food for the journey of life. Jesus strengthens us during our struggle, especially as we come together in community.

Remember Jesus' invitation that says, *come to me, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest*. As you come to the Table of Grace bring that card with you (your worries and your waiting) and leave it here in one of the baskets, a symbol of your faith and trust that God is at work in your waiting. For it is here at the table, where sins are forgiven, grace is received, and we are offered new life in Christ.

Let's pray: Loving and merciful God, thank you for this opportunity to gather together at your table, this special place where Jesus' presence has been made known to us. In our coming today, we've left our regrets and confessions, knowing that you hear every word and wipe every sin away. We also have brought our worries and our waiting, trusting that you are at work in our waiting. Thank you for the spiritual food for all of our journeys in life. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 7, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Dear Lord, my God, I am thankful that you are constantly at work in my life. You are my help in times of difficulty, my strength in times of weakness, my guide when I feel lost and alone. I know that through Your Son, Jesus Christ, You have the power to transform my life, to mend my broken relationships, to bring strength to the weary and hope to the broken hearted. So, when I don't know what to do, I bring my worries, my burdens, my hopes and dreams to you, knowing that you are the Lord of my life and the hope of the world. Amen.

Monday, May 8

Scripture: 1 Timothy 1:12-16, 2 Peter 3:8-9

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful. So he appointed me to ministry even though I used to speak against him, attack his people, and I was proud. But I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith. Our Lord's favor poured all over me along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I'm the biggest sinner of all. But this is why I was shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all. So I'm an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life.

Don't let it escape your notice, dear friends, that with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day. The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives.

Observation

The apostle Paul listed qualities that reflect the character of God, who then grows them in us. He looked back on the days when, as an angry young Pharisee named Saul, he proudly persecuted and killed Christians (Acts 7:57-8:1, 9:1-2). Christ, he said, had displayed his "endless patience" even toward him. In the same letter he wrote that God "wants all people to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4). And Peter wrote that God is patient, "not wanting anyone to perish."

Application

Reflect on the stories you know about Jesus. Was he frantic or impatiently hurried in any of them? Were there times when he did not move as fast as the people around him wanted him to? Can you think of times when Jesus' day-to-day dealings with his disciples, or others, vividly showed God's patience toward fallible human beings like us?

Prayer

God of eternity, I recall the times I have disappointed you by wandering away from the path you know is best for me, and I thank you for your profound, transforming patience. Thank you for never giving up on me. Amen.

Tuesday, May 9

Scripture: Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation.
Should I fear anyone?
The LORD is a fortress protecting my life.
Should I be frightened of anything?
When evildoers come at me trying to eat me up—
it's they, my foes and my enemies,
who stumble and fall!
If an army camps against me,
my heart won't be afraid.
If war comes up against me,
I will continue to trust in this:
I have asked one thing from the LORD—

it's all I seek:
to live in the LORD's house all the days of my life,
seeing the LORD's beauty
and constantly adoring his temple.
Because he will shelter me in his own dwelling
during troubling times;
he will hide me in a secret place in his own tent;
he will set me up high, safe on a rock.
Now my head is higher than the enemies surrounding me,
and I will offer sacrifices in God's tent—
sacrifices with shouts of joy!
I will sing and praise the LORD.
LORD, listen to my voice when I cry out—
have mercy on me and answer me!
Come, my heart says, seek God's face.
LORD, I do seek your face!
Please don't hide it from me!
Don't push your servant aside angrily—
you have been my help!
God who saves me,
don't neglect me!
Don't leave me all alone!
Even if my father and mother left me all alone,
the LORD would take me in.
LORD, teach me your way;
because of my opponents, lead me on a good path.
Don't give me over to the desires of my enemies,
because false witnesses and violent accusers
have taken their stand against me.
But I have sure faith
that I will experience the LORD's goodness
in the land of the living!
Hope in the LORD!
Be strong! Let your heart take courage!
Hope in the LORD!

Observation

Some of the greatest figures in the Bible, including David, had to wait for many years for God's promises. Everything that happened in the meantime was used to prepare them, inwardly as well as outwardly. Then, when they reached their promise, they were blessed beyond measure.

Application: We are invited to trust in God's goodness for today and faithfulness tomorrow. Relinquishing control to God is the main route to experiencing love and peace and uniting our hearts with God's. It creates a level of maturity and character that we will take with us into the future, and it enables us to enjoy his future blessings all the more. What control can you release to God today, trusting in God's future blessings?

Prayer: God, today, I release control of _____ to you. Help me to be still and wait, trusting in your goodness and faithfulness. Amen.

Wednesday, May 10

Scripture: Luke 24:44-49

Jesus said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. He said to them, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I’m sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power.”

Observation

As he did on the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained the Scriptures to all the disciples. He taught them to reflect on the big picture of Israel’s history from Moses to the Psalms, to see that in the Christ (anointed one) there is salvation and justice. That was more than just information. He commissioned them to share his message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. “You are witnesses,” he said, promising that God’s power would help them spread his message to all nations.

Application

Your personal story of a changed heart and life is powerful to the non-religious and nominally religious people you interact with wherever you live, work or play. You are a disciple, and like the first disciples, are a witness to God’s life-changing work through Jesus Christ. In what ways can you share your personal story of a changed heart and life with those who know you?

Prayer

God, keep me alert for chances to faithfully share your story. Give me courage when afraid, confidence when unsure, patience when anxious, and passion when indifferent. Help me share my personal story of a changed heart and life. Amen.

Thursday, May 11

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Observation

The earliest Christians were a largely unknown group, living out their faith in a city that had crucified their Lord. But they trusted that the risen Christ was with them, a trust built on the apostles’ teaching, prayer, fellowship, and a radical spirit of helping one another. That bound them together. They shared their faith in appealing ways that made people’s lives better (Acts 2:36-41). In the end, the obscure movement they belonged to would shape the world more effectively than the Roman Empire’s armies.

Application

The Holy Spirit's power moved the first Christians to live in ways that connected them to one another. It wasn't just a few things—it was meals, it was prayers, it was worshiping and learning together. Verse 44 said they "were united and shared everything." The Spirit empowered them to set aside a focus on their own gain to bless others. In what ways has the Spirit broadened the horizons of your life, guiding you to share that life to lift other people up?

Prayer

Living Lord Jesus, you gave yourself fully for my sake. Grow in me a heart that more fully mirrors your generous spirit as I relate to others in my world. Amen.

Friday, May 12**Scripture: Hebrews 10:22-25**

Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water. Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable. And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.

Observation

Yesterday, we read Acts 2's report that the very first Christians in Jerusalem formed a community that met regularly, shared life, and supported one another. As the good news of Jesus spread, Christians in other places also formed communities, usually more than one in each city. In the Roman Empire, meeting together could be risky. But Jesus' followers knew that they belonged, grew and served by being together in those local gatherings.

Application

Think about the depth and quality of the connection you have with other believers. Is anyone on your "2 a.m. call list" if you faced a serious problem? Are you on anyone else's list? That quality of connection never happens overnight. We build trust over time, through shared experiences. How can you let the Holy Spirit deepen your connections now, so that you can be there to uphold one another through any of life's storms?

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for connecting me to your family. Help me to "spark" love and good deeds in others, and to be receptive to your sparks as they arrive in my life. Amen.

Saturday, May 13**Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12**

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

Observation

As John wrote about the relationships God wants Christians to have with one another, he likely remembered where he and Jesus' other disciples began. They competed with one another for position and recognition and got angry with each other if one person's efforts seemed to be gaining the upper hand (Mark 10:35-45). John knew from his own experience that loving others with Jesus' love doesn't just spring naturally from warm human feelings. It goes much deeper than just being "nice." The ultimate source of this kind of active agape love is not us at all, but the eternally loving heart of God. The God of the universe loves us, and that is the reason we are committed to living with one another in love.

Application

Which people, inside or beyond the church, do you find it hardest to love? Read and pray through this passage, plugging in their names and faces. Ask God to help you live out God's love even toward them. Why did John bother to say, "No one has ever seen God" (verse 12)? He went on to say, "If we love each other, God remains in us." In other words, when we're getting it right, people can see God in us. It's like the line in Gordon Jensen's song that says, "You're the only Jesus some will ever see."

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2neQ5Hx0Hw0>) As your capacity grows to take in God's love, to see yourself as loveable in God's sight, how is this changing the way you see and relate to others?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, let the people with whom I come in contact—yes, even the bored store clerk or the annoying neighbor—see you and your love in me. Amen.