

Called to Wait

1 Samuel 22:1-5

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
Sunday, July 1, 2001

Real Audio (3 MB)

Of all the things God calls us to do in life, none is more important, or more difficult, than the call to wait.

Do I really have to make the case that we spend a lot of time waiting? It takes about nine months of waiting in the womb before our lungs even breath fresh air, and as life begins so it continues. Everybody in the sanctuary today is waiting on something. Some are waiting to see what happens in a relationship, or with their children, or if they will even have children. Others are waiting to see what happens at work, or if they will ever find a job they truly love. Still others are waiting to see what happens with their health. Some are even waiting to see if they will survive their diseases.

Maybe the hardest waiting is waiting upon God. You have claimed one of the promises of Scripture as God's promise to you: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). "Call unto me and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things you do not know" (Jeremiah 33:3). "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purposes" (Romans 8:28). You have taken one of these promises to heart, and now you are waiting upon the Lord for the fulfillment of what was promised. How do you survive the wait? How do you turn it into something other than wasted time?

The life of David provides a wonderful response to these important questions. He had already been anointed by God as the new king of Israel. But Israel already had a king, who wasn't about to just walk out of the office. In fact, King Saul had already decided to kill David, and for years and years David was on the run from Saul, waiting for God to deliver his promises. But David wasn't just wasting time. No, his waiting became the means by which God molded the soul of Israel's next king.

That is what your waiting is all about as well. While you wait, you are making the most important choices of your life. These are the choices that will make all the difference when the waiting is done. They will determine if you have the soul to fulfill your calling.

After fleeing Saul, we find David entering three different types of sanctuaries. He thought they were just places to find sanctuary from Saul. But a sanctuary is never just a place where we wait and hide. It is always a place where we confront the greatest choices in life.

The first sanctuary David found was holiness. He left Jerusalem and went to the city of Nob, where the priest Ahimelech was serving the Lord. David arrived there desperate, hungry, and afraid. The priest asked him why he had come to their humble temple. David lied to the priest and said he was on a mission for King Saul. When the priest asked about the mission, David invented one of Washington's favorite lines telling the priest that it was a secret and the priest didn't have the clearance. Then he asked the priest for some food. The priest said all he had was the holy bread that wasn't for eating. But David demanded that he be given the sacrament for his hungry men, which was another lie, because at this point there were no men.

This is how many of us approach the sanctuary of God. We enter this sanctuary desperate for something that will take away the hunger. We think we are just hungry for a relationship, or a job, or for healing, but it is actually our souls that are hungry for God. Without having a lot of patience for such priestly chatter, though, we insist that the church do something to help young parents, men or women, single adults, older adults or teenagers. Fleeing the long wait for better social experiences out there, we demand that the church provide them. But all that the church really has to offer are holy experiences.

The amazing thing is that the priest Ahimelech gives David the holy bread and lets him gobble it down. What is even more amazing is that much later Jesus reminds people of this when he uses the Sabbath to feed his hungry disciples. If Jesus Christ has condoned using the Sabbath to care for the felt needs of people, the church of Jesus Christ can never worry about protecting its holiness from the world.

Do people come to church with mixed motives? Yes, of course. I did. I still do, and so do you. It doesn't matter, because holiness isn't made less holy just because we grab at it, or try to stuff it into our loneliness, broken hearts. If people are coming to church to find friends, that's not all bad. If they are coming just to find sanctuary from their anxieties, that's okay. Even if they are lying or giving false impressions about their morality in church, it can't pollute the holiness. The sanctuary remains holy not because of the members who gather here, but because of the sacred Word we proclaim and the grace we offer.

So while you wait, come to church. Come and bring your hunger, your yearnings and longings, and your fears. And as you consume the church's friendships, therapy, music, and programs, realize that the holiness of God can be found in all these things. Our social experiences aren't any better than the culture's, but they do contain holiness. Don't get preoccupied with the earthen vessel, and miss the treasure. It is the holiness that will get you through the waiting, and it is the holiness that will mold your soul.

After leaving the sanctuary in Nob, David eventually finds himself hiding in a cave at Adullam. If at Nob, David found sanctuary in receiving holiness, at Adullam he finds sanctuary in receiving a community. But it was not the community he would have picked for himself. It never is.

While he is hiding in this cave, God brings him an army of 400 men. We are told, "Everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented came to him." On this Fourth of July, it is useful to remember that this is pretty much

how our country began. It's also a pretty good depiction of the contemporary church. Look around you at whom God has gathered into the cave called church. Everyone who is in distress, in debt, and discontented.

Maybe you prefer the language of St. Paul. "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. . . so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:26-30).

If you have ever moved into a new community and done a little church shopping, you know it is not long before every church disappoints you. The people you will find there are completely biblical. They are needy and discontented. Just like you.

So how is this a sanctuary? How does this help us with the waiting? Because it is God who has called this motley band together, and because a Savior is always found among those who know they need one. Wherever a Savior is found, souls are being shaped and molded.

We are told in 1 Chronicles 12, that this discouraging little community of 400 eventually were transformed into King David's finest and best troops. We are not what we appear to be. We are what God has called us to be. And in community we become our potential. No one is ever called to wait alone. You need some distressed soul to wait with you, and to remind you that "He who hath begun a good work in you will bring it to completion." (Philippians 1:6)

After leaving Adullam, with all his distressed, indebted, discontented comrades, David then goes to another cave in Engedi. Now he has moved from the sanctuary of holiness, and the sanctuary of community, to the sanctuary of obedience.

While David and some of his 400 men were hiding in a cave from Saul and his 3,000 soldiers, Saul strolled into the cave to relieve himself. David's men thought this was his opportunity to slay Saul. But David refused saying, "How can I raise my hand against the Lord's anointed." So instead David snuck up behind Saul, and cut off a piece of his cloak. After the unwitting Saul got up, got himself back together and left the cave, David ran after him and called out, "My Lord the King, see the corner of your cloak in my hand. Know this day that my hand shall never rise against you."

Notice the fascinating contradiction here. David has been anointed, promised, that he will be the king of Israel. The current king is out in the fields trying to hunt him down. David is given a great opportunity to defend himself by killing Saul, but he can't do it because that would be a disobedient sin against the Lord's other anointed. So he's an anointed king and Saul's an anointed king, and clearly there can only be one king.

It's like the contradictions you face while you wait. You were called to do a job, but someone opposes everything you try to do. You could get rid of that person but that wouldn't honor the God who called you. So what do you do? Or you feel called to be in a loving, even romantic relationship, but you can't even get a decent second date because of your biblical commitment to chastity until marriage. Now what? Or you want to move, and your spouse doesn't. You have both prayed about this and are both pretty certain your opinions are anointed. Now what?

When you hold seemingly contradictory spiritual truths, in the words of Soren Kierkegaard, you don't resolve it by sweeping one truth under the rug. Instead, you wait insisting on obedience, until God resolves the contradiction. And as you wait, your soul is molded by a conviction that God is faithful to his promises.

When Saul realized that David had not taken his life, it broke the old king. He said, "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good for evil. Now I know that you shall surely be king, and the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand."

Saul knew that day that he would lose this battle. David knew that he would prevail, in this battle and in all the battles that would follow. Not by might or wit, but by having faith in the faithfulness of God.

Knowing in your soul that God is faithful is the key to fulfilling any calling. You only learn about the faithfulness of God during the long periods of waiting, and you only survive the waiting by resorting to the sanctuaries God has given you. So come. Come to the sanctuary of holiness that feeds your hunger with God himself. Come to the sanctuary of community where you are transformed into the body of Christ. Come to the sanctuary of obedience where you insist on honoring God with your choices until he chooses to bring you to a future filled with hope.

Lord God, you have promised that those who wait upon you, will renew their strength, and mount up with wings as eagles. We don't often feel as though we are soaring. So give us the courage to continue waiting in the places of holiness, community, and obedience, until you have molded our souls, and our spirits take flight. Amen.