



## SERMONS

### Not What We Expected

#### Why Doesn't God Show Up Now?

Isaiah 9:6-7

November 29, 2020

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#### **Waiting**

"Why doesn't Jesus kill the virus?" That's the question Ezra, my 5-year-old son, has asked me about once per week in the last nine months. "Why doesn't Jesus kill the virus?" I wonder if you've asked that same question, or a similar one? "When will this all be over?" "When can things just go back to normal?" "How long?"

"Pandemic fatigue" is what the journalists are calling it. We're tired of the pandemic and there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. We've been waiting for it to get better, but nothing seems to change. We're tired. We're stressed. We're done.

My name is Ellis and I'm one of the pastors here at Chapel Hill. You're joining us for a new series, called "Not What We Expected." Because, let's be honest, 2020 was not what we expected. But the reality is, a life with Jesus is rarely what we expect. A life with Jesus is a thrilling encounter with surprises and twists and turns that propel us to a life beyond what we could dream. A life with Jesus is not what we expected, it's better. And our hope is that you might discover this sort of life over the coming weeks.



Today we're talking about the issue of waiting. Sometimes things don't happen when we expect it. Certainly, the virus has caused a lot of things to hit pause. And I want to touch upon three aspects of waiting: the pain of waiting, the purpose of waiting, and the practice of waiting.

## The Pain of Waiting

We certainly aren't the first people to experience the pain of waiting. God's people knew what it was to wait. Around 2500 years ago, God spoke to his people, who at that time were the nation-state of Judah, through a man named Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet. And most of the things that Isaiah spoke about came true within his lifetime. But there was one big thing that didn't. Isaiah prophesied that one day, God's people would be ruled by a King who set everything right. Here's what Isaiah said.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever."

(Isaiah 9:6-7 NIV11)

Depending upon your political views, you may feel like America is getting a president who is going to set everything right, or is losing a president who was setting everything right. We all know the power good leadership can have over a nation. And God's people knew that too. But for 400 years after Isaiah prophesied about this coming King, God's people were held captive by other nations, without a leader of their own. They were left waiting for the promise of God to arrive for 400 years. And it was painful. They felt lost; abandoned by God.

I don't know if you've ever got so tired of the pain of waiting that you've taken matters into your own hands? When I was very little, my parents would make me wait until



after we had eaten lunch on Christmas Day to open my presents. One year, I think I was maybe three or four years old, as we were finishing off lunch, my parents noticed I was missing from the lunch table. My parents and grandparents went upstairs to the living room, and there they found me, sitting in a pile of wrapping paper, having unwrapped, not just my presents, but every single present under the tree!

Maybe you've gotten so tired of the pain of waiting that you've taken matters into your own hands in a different way. Maybe a more destructive way. Maybe in this season you've resorted to habits that have ensnared you in the past, and you thought you were free of, but you've found yourself back there again. Maybe you've picked up some new coping mechanisms as you've dealt with the pain of waiting—spending just a little too much online, having an extra drink every evening, or losing your temper with your kids more frequently. Waiting is painful. This season has been painful.

As I mentioned at the beginning, my 5-year-old son, Ezra has been weekly asking, "Why doesn't Jesus kill the virus?" And I think he is asking a similar question to many of us in seasons of waiting: "Why doesn't God show up now?" If God is all powerful, he has the power to stop this thing today. So why doesn't he? Why are we still waiting?

Waiting is painful. That's the first aspect of waiting I want us to consider. But the second is this: Waiting has a Purpose.

## **The Purpose of Waiting**

One of Jesus' brothers, James, wrote these words, speaking of the power of waiting for trials to be over. He said:

"Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows



its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way."

(James 1:2-4 MESSAGE)

When I was in college, I remember having the opportunity to meet a man who had climbed Everest. Now in England, our highest mountain, Scafell Pike, is only 3200 feet, so I really had no idea what was involved in climbing something almost 10 times that size. I kind of figured you just start walking and then camp each night until you get to the top. How wrong I was!

The biggest obstacle in climbing a mountain like Everest is the altitude. If you do not acclimatize your body to the altitude, slowly, over many days, you will not be able to summit. In fact, if you just tried walking straight to the top, you'd die. Instead, as I learned from this man, climbing Everest involves a series of climbs and descents, and much waiting. If I recall correctly it went something like this... You climb to base camp and wait. Then you climb to camp 1, then descend to base camp. Then camp 1, camp 2, and back to base camp. Then camp 1, camp 2, camp 3, back to camp 2, back to camp 3, and descend to base camp. Then, finally, camp 1, camp 2, camp 3, camp 4, and summit.

When James wrote those words, "Don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way." it makes me think of this man who climbed Everest. If he had just climbed right to the top, he would have died. He needed to become well-developed, not deficient in any way. And that process takes time. And it even involves going backwards. It's the same in life. Some of the most important lessons we learn come through prolonged seasons of waiting.

Three years ago, my family and I took a trip back to our home country of England. While there, we went to the US Embassy in London to renew our visa. We'd done this



twice before and felt like experienced Embassy-goers. But that day our world got turned upside-down. A few hours later we were walking out of the Embassy with denial stamped on our application, and little to no hope of returning to our home in the US anytime soon. And so began a season of waiting; waiting as we attempted to get the decision reversed and a visa approved.

As I look back now, it was only one month between our visa being initially denied and eventually being granted, but that one month felt like an eternity at the time. At the time, I recall asking God, "Why can't this all be over?" The trauma of the present and uncertainty of the future was agony. All I wanted was for God to take it away, and yet I was made to wait.

Yet, I am reminded that if my visa had been approved at the first attempt, I would not have learned several important lessons. Lessons such as how tightly I was holding on to my status and position. Such as how I was standing in the way of my wife's call to ministry. And such as how being with Jesus is more important than doing things for Jesus. If I had not had to wait, I would not have grown and developed in the same way. If I had got an instant result, I would not be who I am today.

This is how our God works. He isn't concerned with timelines and deadlines like we are. He is concerned that we become the people he has destined for us to be. He is concerned that we are shaped and molded and formed into people that look more and more like his Son, Jesus. When we ask the question, "Why doesn't God show up now?" perhaps it is betraying the fact that we don't realize that he is already showing up... that is he is already at work... that he is already meeting us in the midst of our despair and saying, "This is all part of the plan."

What if you are so eager to get through this season of your life, that you are missing the work that God is doing right now?



I believe God is at work, right now, shaping you, and forming you through this time of waiting, to be a better version of yourself. A version of yourself that is more patient, more loving, more liberated than the one that existed 9 months ago. That's the purpose of waiting. And I wonder if, for so many of us, we are so eager to rush to the other side of this season, that we are preventing this transformation from taking place? Waiting is painful. But waiting has a purpose. And that leads me to the final aspect of waiting I want us to consider: the practice of waiting.

## The Practice of Waiting

Today we begin a season the church has celebrated for 1500 years: Advent. Advent means coming, and it is a season in which the church intentionally practices waiting—waiting for the coming of Jesus. The church practices waiting, because we believe that through practicing waiting, we find a greater sense of the purpose of waiting, and greater relief from the pain of waiting.

There are many ways to practice waiting, but I want to suggest one way to you today. Think through your next few days, and I want you to identify a 15 min chunk of time when you know you can be by yourself in a quiet room. For some of you that will be really easy, because you're stuck at home without screaming children. But for those of us who have screaming children, it takes a little bit of preparation; maybe you have to get up a little early one day and get downstairs before the kids. Think through your next few days. Pick a 15-minute timeslot. Once you've identified those 15 mins, determine that you're going to protect it in your schedule; this is time when you are going to get alone with God and it's important.

When that time arrives, I want to invite you to put your phone in another room, and grab a pen and something to write on. And then write these two questions down: What has been painful in this season? What is the purpose of this season? Then pray and ask God to reveal to you the answers to those questions. After praying, wait. Wait and see how God speaks to you.



I did this waiting practice a few days ago, and I was surprised at the clarity it gave me. As I waited, I began to realize that one of the most painful aspects of this season for me has been the uncertainty it has given me regarding the future.

I am a big planner. I love to have things lined up and ready to execute. I even have a 17-page Life Plan. Yeah, I'm weird. In fact, every day I use an old-fashioned paper planner to plan out my day and list what I want to accomplish. In the front it has a space to list annual goals, and I began the year with such high hopes as to what I was going to accomplish. Of course, so much of that changed so quickly.

The uncertainty of the future this year has produced anxiety in me like I don't normally experience. And as I took time to practice waiting a few days ago, I began to see that this anxiety is directly tied to my desire to control the future—to my bent towards planning. And as I continued to practice waiting, I asked God what was the purpose in this season. And I felt him saying to me that in this season he was teaching me, in a greater way, what it was to trust him with my future. To be willing to let go of my control, and trust in his control.

I don't know what has been the pain of waiting, or the purpose of waiting for you in this season, but I want to invite you to think through your next few days, find 15 mins, and practice waiting. Waiting on God to show you what has been the pain of waiting for you, and what has been the purpose of waiting.

## Conclusion

Waiting is painful, but waiting has a purpose. Although it might be hard to see, I believe God can, and will make it clear to you, if you are willing to take the time to practice waiting. And I believe that one day, we will all look back on this time and give thanks to God for the lessons he taught us, for the transforming work he did in us,



and for the people he shaped us to be. So, find 15 minutes. Practice waiting. Allow God to minister to your pain. Allow him to show you his purpose.