

It is said that Americans are the most time-conscious people in the world. We are always in a hurry. We invented fast food, instant coffee, instant messenger, express mail, express oil changes and expressways. We are people constantly on the move. As one man put it, we're people who shout at our microwave ovens to hurry up.

I'm not going to ask you to hold up your hand if you enjoy waiting . . . for anything. That would hold up my sermon too much. And that would be a cardinal sin.

One lady wrote about her frustrations waiting in line. She wrote: "Here are the reasons I'd like to thank Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and my local grocer for having 25 checkout lanes and only three open at any given time . . .

"Waiting in long lines keeps my domestic brain from going completely idle there's so much to learn!

"I can catch up on my magazine reading without buying any.

"I have time to leave my cart in line and run back to get the 13 things on my list I forgot.

"I can be one of those annoying cell phone users and catch up on all my phone calls to my insurance agent, mother-in-law, and Auntie Anne.

"I can catch a quick catnap now rather than on the drive home.

"I can assess what other people have in their carts and get exciting new dinner ideas.

"I can finally apply my top coat of nail polish with plenty of drying time.

"I can run next door and pick up my dry cleaning.

"I can update my coupon organizer and leave the trash in the we-never-open-enough-checkout-lanes store instead of my purse.

"I can practice my standup comedy routines on unsuspecting fellow customers.

"I can practice some standing yoga poses and then do those isometric muscle-contracting exercises no one else in line is supposed to know you're doing.

"I can taste test my package of the newest low-carb, zero-transfat, Splenda-saturated cookies.

"I can breathe heavily on my T-bones so they're defrosted in time for dinner and I won't have to leave them out on the driveway in the hot late afternoon sun as I normally do." (1) Things to do while you're waiting in line. We've all been there, haven't we? Times when we've had to wait.

Dr. Stanley Sneeringer writes about the impatience we feel while waiting for an elevator to arrive. Manufacturers such as Otis Elevator have this down to a science. They know that a good waiting time for an elevator is in the neighborhood of 15 seconds, because at around 40 seconds people start to get visibly upset. "When they're waiting for an elevator, as well as when they're in an elevator, they don't really feel they can do much productive," says one executive at Otis. Once on board, elevator antsiness only intensifies while waiting for the door to close.

Dr. Sneeringer asks, "How long do you think you generally have to wait? Twenty seconds? Ten seconds? Five seconds? Two seconds?"

“[The] answer: only two to four seconds, which doesn’t sound like much, but feels for some of us like a very long time. And not just if we’re anxious Americans. ‘If you travel in Asia at all,’ observes [this same executive], ‘you will notice that the CLOSE DOOR button in elevators is the one with the paint worn off. It gets used more than any other button in the elevator.’ Asians can’t wait for that door to close so they can be on their way.

Ironically, notes Dr. Sneeringer, the CLOSE DOOR button is often disabled by building managers for liability reasons. People keep pushing the button and it doesn’t even work. It is a dummy, a piece of exercise equipment for anxious fingers.” (2)

The point is that few of us enjoy waiting: in an elevator, in a long shopping line, in the doctor’s office or wherever we happen to be.

One woman tells about arriving 20 minutes early for her son’s one o’clock appointment with the doctor. She watched patient after patient disappear into the various rooms. When she was still sitting in the waiting room 1½ hours later, she’d had enough and had become pretty irate. Fortunately, as she got up and went to the receptionist, she calmed down enough to handle it without anger.

When she arrived at the desk she said calmly, “I know my son’s appointment was for one o’clock. Can you tell me if that was a.m. or p.m.?” (3)

What a great way to express your frustration. I wish I could come up with witty lines like that when I’m frustrated. And yet, waiting is a part of life.

Here is something that you need to know: waiting plays a big role in the Bible. Think about it. Biblical characters spent a considerable part of their lives waiting.

Noah waited 120 years until it began to rain.

Abraham waited until he was 99 years old before his promised son Isaac was born.

The children of Israel waited in slavery for 400 years before God sent Moses to deliver them.

God told Moses he would lead his people out of slavery, but then made him wait in the desert 40 years before he was allowed to do anything about it.

Joseph, unjustly accused, spent 14 years in prison. Then God elevated him to second-in-command in Egypt.

God had David anointed as king, but then David waited for years until the death of Saul before he actually ascended to the throne.

Job waited a lifetime, 60-70 years, before he was vindicated.

Even Jesus waited for 30 years before he started his ministry.

Waiting was a part of life for the heroes of the Bible, just as it is part of life for us.

In today’s lesson from the book of Acts, Jesus gives his disciples a difficult assignment. He tells them to wait. It was just before Christ’s ascension into heaven. Listen to these important words: “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating

with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised . . .”

Don't you think that is interesting? Before they did anything else, they were to wait. It's a little bit ironic. The Book of Acts is sometimes called, “The Acts of the Apostles.” It is a record of their activities the many things they did. But here in the first chapter of the book Christ is telling them to do nothing. First, they are to wait. But what is it for which they are waiting?

They are awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit. “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Then a few verses later he says to them: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

This is the last thing Christ says to them before he leaves this earth. Actually there are basically two commands that Christ gives them in this passage. The first is to wait for the gift of the Spirit and the second is that they are to be his witnesses. These two commands are sequential: wait and then witness. Why do I say they are sequential? It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the power we need to bear witness to our faith. No waiting no witness, at least no effective witness. I suspect this is why many of us are so feeble in our witness to faith. We are not spending enough time waiting.

Many of us grew up loving the King James Version translation of Isaiah 40:31: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

Waiting precedes witnessing. The Holy Spirit gives us power for this demanding task.

I like the way one unknown author describes the work of the Spirit. He uses the analogy of a common source of power, gasoline. He says that the power of gasoline can be experienced in two different ways. It can be unleashed, or it can be harnessed.

Suppose I were to drop a lighted match in a ten gallon barrel of gasoline. What will happen at that point? I would probably die. Ten gallons of gas can produce quite an explosion.

On the other hand, suppose I were to pour that ten gallons of gas into the gas tank of my car. Then, depending on the fuel efficiency of my car, I might be able to drive hundreds of miles. Dropping a lighted match into a barrel of gasoline might produce a spectacular effect, but a controlled burn will take me a lot further in life.

The Holy Spirit is the fuel in the Christian's tank to help us to be all that Christ has called us to be. We wait on the gift of the Holy Spirit, then we seek to live for Christ. If we want to mount up with wings as eagles, we must first wait upon the Lord. We must pray for Christ's Holy Spirit within us.

There was once a German Lutheran missionary to Sumatra named Ludwig Nommensen. Ludwig has been described as one of the most successful missionaries ever to preach the gospel.

Ludwig went to work with a tribe in a remote area of Sumatra. The village chief welcomed him. He said, “You have 2 years to learn our customs and convince us you have a message worth hearing.” The chief wanted Ludwig to explain how Christianity differs from the morality and the traditions the tribe already had. “We already know what is right,” the chief explained. “We too have laws that say we must not steal, or take our neighbor's wives, or tell lies.”

Ludwig replied, “That's true. But my God supplies the power needed to keep those laws.”

This startled the chief. “Can you really teach my people to live better?”

“No, I can’t,” responded Ludwig. “But if they receive Jesus Christ, God will give them the strength to do what is right.”

The chief invited him to stay another 6 months, during which Ludwig preached the gospel and taught villagers how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of Christians. “You can stay as long as you want,” the chief finally announced. “Your God walks with [people] and gives them strength to do the things He requires.” (4)

Many Christian believers have never grasped this principle. The Christ life can never be lived apart from the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. We need to spend time waiting, as well as witnessing. We need to pray that God will give us His Spirit to live within us that we might be empowered to be all that He has called us to be.

This feast of the Ascension is not so much about Jesus’ departure but rather the new empowerment that happens when Jesus, raised from the dead, is associated with his Father in the transformation of the world. For Jesus ascends in power to bestow power upon his followers. Jesus vanishes from our midst in one kind of presence in order for us to be empowered by the Holy Spirit he sends upon us.

The angels make this point in almost a comical way to the Apostles. They stand, staring up into the sky, looking at Jesus as his body vanishes. “Men of Galilee,” they say, “Why are you looking into the heavens?” This is just like the angels message to the women on Easter morning: Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is raised. Now we can live in his resurrection. He does the same thing to the disciples on their way to Emmaus: once they recognize him, he vanishes from their sight. The point is not his risen Body, as essential as his resurrection is. The point is that we are now empowered to live his life and continue his ministry.

This is what the Holy Spirit accomplishes in us: our prayer, our service, our care for each other, our witness to Jesus in our lives, our inviting, our sharing—all of this is the power of Jesus given to us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants no pity-parties. He wants no extended grieving. He does not need us to cling onto his body. Rather, filled with the same power of God by which Jesus was raised from the dead, he wants us to live risen lives, to live Easter and be Easter in the world today.

Then and only then can we experience the wisdom of the words of Isaiah: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

1. Sermon Fodder, <http://www.sermonfodder.com/>.

2. <http://www.faithlutheranchurch.org/00sermons/07-23-00.htm>

3. Clean Laffs, <http://www.gophercentral.com/sub/sub-jokes.html>.

4. Davon Huss, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/scripture/illustrations-on-romans-715-725.asp?passage=romans%207:15-7:25>.