

## When Church Stops Working Book Study, Presbytery of Niagara Chapter 4: It's Time to Wait, but for What?

### Summary:

- We do not like to wait for 3 reasons: we have somewhere to go; we cannot control what stops us; we are alone.
- Waiting leads to anger
- Speeding up blinds us to what is going on right in front of us
- Luke's Gospel ends with two followers on the road to Emmaus.
- The Book of Acts begins where the gospel leaves off. Jesus tells the disciples to wait. This is the beginning of the church
- Wait for God to act
- Then act out of the waiting, in response to God's action
- We wait *together*
- Waiting becomes a kind of being, filled with eating and storytelling, praying and remembering, rehearsing again and again the story of Jesus Christ's life and its meaning.
- The Spirit does not come to go-getters. The church does not need go-getters
- Peter is a go-getter. He fails to follow the action of God. He learns to wait; painfully. Only then can he be the rock upon which the church is built.
- When the church feels the heavy burden of the command to wait for God to act, inside the uneasy waiting, it becomes easy to distract ourselves with meetings, procedures, politics and more.
- The acts of the apostles choose Matthias – who is never heard about again.
- The act of God elects Paul.
- Paul begins his ministry by waiting.

### Waiting Doesn't Suck

- Waiting only sucks when you have the wrong story
- The church must wait because its *only* job is to witness to the living Jesus Christ, who is moving in the world.
- Anxiety and anger have a way of committing us to a story where our own needs and wants take center stage
- We are not good at waiting because so many things come to us instantaneously – texts, emails, Amazon deliveries...
- Stories in which we are not the star can shape our own life in a fundamental way
- We find deep fulfilment in being a supporting part of another person's story. (Think parenting)
- The church is not the star of its own story
- Acts is a story about the God who brings salvation to the world through Jesus Christ.
- The church is the community that believes it is not the star of its own story. This belief comes back to dying in humility.
- The church exists only as it attends to the story of God in the world.

- The church can be faithful *only* when its focus is not on its own actions but on the acts of God.
- The church lives for a bigger story
- God acts through the church for the sake of the world
- Waiting is the gift of having purpose, even an identity, that has its origin in something other than our anxious selves.
- We seem so anxious about church survival that we're confused about the real star of the church story
- Our anxiety runs high: if we don't make our congregation the star of its own story and get moving faster and faster, we'll be left with only memories and regrets.
- But: waiting is our friend. It is the only way we can survive. It allows us to see God's actions.
- The church is the witness, the narrator, to the bigger story of God's action to save the world.
- We turn away from God in our anxiety to survive, inevitably shifting our focus onto our church.
- There have been *much more* difficult times for the church than the one we're living through now and the church survived.
- The fact is that the church of Jesus Christ is created and sustained by Jesus Christ.
- The church is the body of the resurrected Christ, and no body can ignore its head and expect to get anywhere.
- We have learned from other crises the church has faced in its history that the *only* way out is not to focus on the church but instead to return our attention to the God who acts.
- Church consultants tell us to own our own story, discover our unique assets etc. – which is all about competition and a secular mindset: for winning resources and relevance that will beat back decline
- Jesus commands the church to wait – so that the Spirit can lead the church in following Christ in the world.

### Discussion:

So far, some thoughts that have stirred as a result of reading the first 4 chapters:

- We are not responsible for saving the church – God is. Programs will not save the church.
- It is sad when a church closes.
- Waiting together may not seem terribly exciting, but most meaningful moments happen when we're living out the story together
- The Holy Spirit, not human effort, ought to lead the leaders of the church.
- Feelings of helplessness if waiting takes too long.
- Being patient and trusting God is hard
- Might we miss seeing God while we're waiting?
- God is in the community. God is in the conversation. We don't always recognize God's presence.
- In the persons right in front of us, that is where we find God

- God is always there. Just because God isn't working to our expectations or desires, doesn't mean that God isn't fulfilling a plan.
- It is not a matter of God not being here, but a matter of us not realizing it. God is always here.

Tell of a time when *waiting* was a joyful, positive experience:

- Some never have experienced waiting as joyful.
  - Waiting is bearable if the outcome is known
  - If the outcome is not known, anxiety increases with time and feelings of having to *do* something to encourage the outcome arise.
  - Delayed gratification is a good thing
  - Waiting during pregnancy can be joyful
  - A chance happening of a long line-up in a pharmacy on Christmas day: people began interacting with each other and it turned into a very joyful time of waiting together.
  - A survey of 1000 youth, being asked when they felt closest to God, showed that the vast majority did so when with their grandparents.
  - Regarding the apostle Paul:
    - While still Saul, he took matters into his own hands and pursued Christians
    - He encountered God on the road to Damascus
    - He had to wait while blind
    - He acted in response to God's primary action to plant churches etc.
    - He moved in response to the Holy Spirit telling him not to go in certain directions.
1. The earliest church committee chose Matthias to be the replacement for Judas. Acts never mentions him again. Several chapters later, God chooses Saul of Tarsus. In your local church, recall a time when you didn't wait on God and proceeded with your plans. Did God show up later with their own solution?
    - We cannot expect God to work inside our timelines – example: having a “5-year plan.”
    - Our time is linear, God's is infinite/outside of time
    - Challenge of discerning whether or not something is God's idea
    - The way Matthias was chosen seems like the way we choose new ministers...
  2. The authors state that “Waiting is our friend. It is the only way we can survive. It allows us to see God's actions.” What is your response to this claim?
    - If we just forge ahead by ourselves, we can bury ourselves
    - We'd be like chickens with their heads cut off
    - We've tried “busy” and it hasn't “worked.”
    - Confusion around waiting and what that looks like
    - Being together, at church, during coffee hour, during this Zoom call, being present in the moment
    - Inviting people to church as a friend, with no agenda

- Living Faith 9.2.1 – “... in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to life in Christ.”

3. Why do we dislike waiting? (dig deeper...)

- Everything in life is instant – technology speeds everything up
- Waiting in times of crisis or tragedy is very difficult, but made better when together.
- We're so focused on what we want to have happen that we don't stop to enjoy where we are.
- It's a good idea to slow down and enjoy life, not to multi-task
- Modern psychologists talk about finding yourself, but we want to find God.
- Resonance: relishing being together, with God
- Being open and receptive (waiting with the hockey stick on the ice)