



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

What Are You Waiting For?

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ DECEMBER 17, 2023

On February 7, 2020, Winter Storm Kade blanketed Upstate New York with a foot of snow and a quarter inch of ice. Steve Clark was stuck in Chicago O'Hare Airport waiting for a flight to Upstate New York. After waiting through multiple delays, I boarded the plane for Albany. All was well until the pilot shared some chilling words, "Albany Airport is closed due to the weather. We have been diverted to JFK."

After we landed in New York City, I waited an hour for the bus to arrive, and endured another three hours on the long bus ride to Albany. We arrived at Albany Airport at 11 PM, and I was still an hour away from home...I had thought I would be home for dinner! I freed my car from its icy tomb and started the hour-long drive home. As I was driving along 87 North, I saw a small object on the highway. I couldn't swerve in time to miss it, so I ran over a small canister of gasoline. Thankfully, it did not explode, but it did get wedged under my car. I had to pull over, lay down in the slushy, icy, dirty, salty breakdown lane, and pry the container out. I had been waiting for hours to get home and now I was wet, cold, and dirty.

I finally pulled up to my home and a sinking feeling hit me—some of you former Northerners know the feeling—I still had to shovel my driveway! I wasn't married and lived alone on a main road. The snowplow had been shoving ice and snow into my driveway all day. At 12:30 AM I had to park down the street and get my snow shovel to clear the driveway. The snow wasn't the white fluffy stuff! It was heavy, icy, concrete-like blocks of ice. Maybe the thought entered my mind then that Florida might not be so bad!

Grumpy, cold, tired, and sore, I finally got up to my bed at 2 in the morning. And there to greet me on my pillow was a live wasp—in February! In Upstate New York! I had no more patience for this nonsense. I had been waiting all day for my bed. So, I grabbed the thickest book I could find—which happened to be a hymnal—and chucked it at the wasp, splattering it on the wall. It received no “*Amazing Grace!*” from me. Strangely though, when I finally lay down for the sleep I’d been *waiting* for all day—I couldn’t fall asleep! I was so fed up, so frustrated, so irritated by this day gone wrong, that the adrenaline rush kept me awake. The *waiting* was annoying, but it was my *attitude* about waiting that made me miserable.

Many of us know what it’s like to be around someone who doesn’t wait well. Whether it’s the child on a road trip asking, “Are we there yet?” or the demanding customer who expected his well-done steak to be cooked in just two minutes, we know what it’s like to be around someone who does not wait well. We live in a society that tries to eliminate waiting. We pay a premium to skip to the front of the line with the Fast Pass or TSA Pre-Check, or we put a mobile order in at Starbucks only to find when we get there on November 1, that they have already put the Christmas menu up because they don’t like to wait for Christmas, either! When we just can’t avoid waiting, we view it as a necessary evil. Do you know how many months of your life you spend waiting at red lights?

We don’t like to wait!

But when we don’t wait well, it affects the people around us, and it might have some consequences on our souls and our relationships. If you’re waiting for something and things aren’t going according to plan it tends to have a fraying effect. Maybe you’re frustrated with God because you’ve been praying for something for years and He hasn’t answered yet. You’ve been waiting to retire or waiting for your husband to get his act together or waiting for the person of your dreams to show up. Right now, your life doesn’t look like you thought it would, and you’ve been *waiting* for it to finally shape up. You can get so focused on the waiting that other parts of your life

begin to suffer. We are all waiting for something.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Allen asked the question, “What are you waiting for?” To that, I might add, how well are you waiting? Struggling to wait is nothing new. Back in the 1st century AD, people had a hard time waiting as well. The letter we will study today was the second letter written by Peter to a group of people in about 65 AD who were having a hard time waiting for Jesus’ promised return. After all, it had been 30 years! People were saying things like, “Where is this ‘coming’ that he promised?” (2 Peter 3:4). Today, we’ll read Peter’s response which doesn’t seem to take waiting as a necessary evil; he views “waiting” a bit differently.

I will be reading 2 Peter 3:8-14 (CSB), and I invite you to be a part of it as it seems we all need some “waiting” help. There are two words repeated over and over in this passage: “promise” and “wait.” Any time you see the word “promise” or “wait” in the text, read it aloud with me.

Dear friends, don’t overlook this one fact: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. ⁹ The Lord does not delay his **promise**, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed. ¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness ¹² as you **wait** for the day of God and hasten its coming. Because of that day, the heavens will be dissolved with fire and the elements will melt with heat. ¹³ But based on his **promise**, we **wait** for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

¹⁴ Therefore, dear friends, while you **wait** for these things, make every effort to be found without spot or blemish in

his sight, at peace.

The Season of Advent is all about waiting for a promise.

Pastor Brad just mentioned this, and you sang about it in the hymn, *“O Come, O Come, Emanuel.”* There is a longing for God’s promise to be fulfilled. The 1st Christmas was about waiting for the Messiah, Jesus, to bring God’s promises about peace, joy, love, and hope. We are not just waiting for Christmas, we are waiting for Jesus to come again when He will bring as He promised order, justice, and renewal to our broken world.

We might summarize Peter’s main idea in one sentence by saying, “Trusting that Jesus will return one day affects how we wait today.” We ask:

- 1. Why can we trust Jesus’ promise to return one day?**
- 2. What does it look like to wait today?**

Let’s talk about that first question—why can we trust in Jesus’ promise to return one day? Any time we start talking about the idea of Jesus’ second coming, it can feel a little weird to me. What comes to my mind are things like this story from 1844, when preacher William Miller announced that he had calculated the date for the end of the world: March 22, to be exact. Through painstaking study of biblical prophecy, Miller and his followers became convinced of Jesus’ imminent return. As you know by sitting here today, March 22, 1844, came and went and nothing happened. Miller went back and determined he’d missed a number or two and recalculated. October 22, 1844, would be the date. That day came and went. It became known as the Great Disappointment since everyone was waiting for Jesus to return and He didn’t.

William Miller was not alone in trying to predict Jesus’ return. For millennia Christians from Pope Innocent III to your Uncle Jimbo at the Christmas dinner table have been trying to predict when Jesus will come back. Uncle Jimbo is convinced that the rise of AI is a sign of the end times as revealed in the Book of Revelation. Having these conversations is sometimes uncomfortable. This is the “Are we there

yet?” way of waiting. Jesus Himself seemed to discourage this approach to waiting, telling His followers that not even He knew the day or the hour He would return.

The Bible frequently tells believers in Jesus to wait for His promised return. For example, in Hebrews 9:28 we read, *“Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for him.”* As we look around, we see a world full of war, anxiety, brokenness, and suffering. Throughout the scriptures, Jesus’ return to earth is constantly held up as the ultimate hope of the Christian. That is why the dream house, or the dream spouse often leaves us a little disappointed. They don’t fulfill the deep longing we have wired into our souls.

Through the scriptures, the second coming of Jesus is promised to be when the earth will be restored, order and justice brought, evil judged, and the earth renewed. The biblical vision of heaven is not just a disembodied spirit floating on a cloud and playing a harp for all eternity. The Christian vision of heaven is of Jesus returning to earth and remaking it into what we have always longed for it to be. It’s a great thing to wait for! So, Peter, why and how can we wait for it? In response to these tensions, Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:8-9a:

Dear friends, don’t overlook this one fact: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient towards you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.

Peter reminds his readers that time doesn’t function the same way for God as it does for us—God is outside of time. He sees **all** time at once. He has a purpose and knowledge of how everything will unfold. He doesn’t experience the same kind of waiting. If He hasn’t fulfilled His promise yet, He has a good reason! He keeps His promises!

This is what Peter tries to help his audience understand. If God has always fulfilled His promises but He has not fulfilled this one

yet, He must have a good reason. In verse 9, Peter tells us the reason: God isn't slow as some count slowness, but *patient*, desiring all to come to repentance. God's reason is not that He has gotten bored or busy up in heaven. It is not that He is indifferent to our plight on earth. It is that He wants to draw as many people to Himself as possible to experience a new life in Jesus; God is not done yet. He wants more people to enjoy love, hope, and joy. Peter says you can trust God to keep His promise because He's a God who keeps His promises.

Think of it this way. I have a college buddy who still owes me \$20. I came in second in his fantasy baseball league eight years ago. I have finally come to grips with the fact that I am never getting my \$20. This guy and I never really got along. We weren't on the same page. He's still bitter I didn't trade Kris Bryant to him during the 2016 season. But let's say I lend Pastor Brad \$20. I know Pastor Brad is the type of guy who keeps his promises. If a few weeks or maybe a few months pass, and I don't hear back, I wouldn't make the same assumption as I did with my college buddy. I'd assume that one day, I'd get my \$20 back. Why? Because I know Pastor Brad's character. He's the type of man that keeps his word. If he hasn't given it back and he hasn't forgotten, he has a good reason, and I can trust him. I know that someday, I'll get that money back. If someone you don't trust hasn't kept a promise, you just assume they won't keep it. If someone you trust hasn't kept a promise, you assume they haven't kept it *yet*.

Peter assures us that God keeps His promises, though it's not always in the time that we expect. We see that pattern throughout the Bible. Early in the Bible, Abraham was promised a son. But when he was almost ninety years old with no son he came up with a shortcut and had a son with his servant Hagar instead of his wife Sarah and ended up with some unpleasant consequences. The reality is that when God makes a promise, He *always* keeps it, but the timing usually is not what His people expect. Even the coming of Jesus is described in such a way: "*When the time came to completion, God sent his Son But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his*

*Son, born of woman, born under the law.” (Galatians 4:4 ESV). Not when He felt like it, but in the “fullness of time.” All hurts will be healed, all brokenness will be restored, because Jesus **will** keep His promise.*

Peter has been building this argument since chapter 1 where he talked about being an eyewitness of Jesus in action. He assures us this promise *will* be fulfilled: “...*the day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away...and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed*” (2 Peter 3:10). Jesus *will* keep His promise. Evil *will* be judged. Order *will* be restored. The works on earth *will* be disclosed. You can trust in His promise, even when it does not feel like it. Then Peter tells us what it looks like to wait. In verses 11-12, Peter writes, “*Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness as you wait for the day of God.*”

Pastor John Ortberg authored a book entitled **When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box**. In it, he told a modern-day parable of a man who had it all—seemingly. He had worked his way to the top of the corporate ladder, although he stepped on a few heads to get there. He made tons of money and bought a nice house and nice car and convinced himself that this was the way he cared for his family, whom he never really saw since he was at the office all the time. He treated his employees and friends poorly running roughshod over them in his busy schedule as he got to the next important meeting and did the next important thing until the day he suddenly died. Many people who vaguely knew him came to his funeral and said nice things about him to his family. He was buried, and his family went home to the big house, nice car, and piles of money. The man took none of it with him. The game of life had ended, and the car and house and money and reputation went back in the box. What he left behind was a family that wished they had known his love.

When Peter writes that things are going to be “dissolved,” or the works on the earth “exposed,” he is referring to this. For each one of us the “Day of the Lord” is coming. Whether it’s the day we die or

whether Jesus does indeed return in the middle of my sermon, the day will come when we will stand before Jesus and what we have will be revealed. Peter's point is that the money, the accomplishments, and all the "stuff" will all be gone, dissolved. It all goes back in the box. Only one thing remains: *"...the earth and the words on it will be disclosed."* The titles are gone, the reputation is gone, the money is gone; none of it comes with you. All you have left is your character. Pastor Dallas Willard phrased it this way, "The main thing God gets out of your life is not the achievements you accomplish. It's the person you become." Many of us spend a lot of our time, energy, and resources waiting for the things that are going to dissolve instead of focusing on the things that will be disclosed.

I wonder if, in our desire to hurry and get things done, we are losing sight of what's most important. Another pastor I love, John Mark Comer, phrased it this way, "All my worst moments come when I am in a hurry." Sometimes our inability to wait well causes us to prioritize things that don't really matter. Could it be that God cares more about character than climbing the ladder? More about relationships than results? More about listening well to your spouse for 10 minutes than 10 more minutes cramming in more work? More about \$10 spent treating the grandkids to ice cream than \$10 squirreled away for that dream vacation?

The waiting Peter is talking about.

What Peter is talking about is not just waiting passively but waiting with a purpose. The Greek word he uses when he tells us to wait has a preposition attached to it—the preposition "to" or "toward." It is the type of waiting that is looking expectantly for something, looking toward something. It is waiting with a sense of eagerness or a sense of expectation. It is the waiting that influences your current actions.

Think about it this way: Once in a while, the Department of Children and Families drops by for a surprise visit to our preschool. It's their way of making sure standards are maintained and that everything is going well in our fabulous preschool. They don't

announce their visits, so you don't have time to prepare. If DCF arrives and you don't have enough teachers or you aren't following health codes or a kid is crawling around in the ceiling, you are in trouble. What's the solution? Our preschool functions according to code every day as if DCF could show up any day. That way when DCF does come they discover our preschool functioning the way it should, and we get the stamp of approval.

This is what Peter is encouraging us to do: live as if Jesus were coming at any moment! For all of us, the day of the Lord is coming. We might not get that extra 5 years to clean up our lives so our obituary will look the way we want it to. While you wait for the return of Jesus, is your focus on the things that will be dissolved or the things that will be disclosed?

Interestingly, social science corroborates 2 Peter. If you'd like to be happy social science has a surprising solution: think about your death. Surveys suggest that people who think regularly about their death are happier and healthier than others. This sounds morbid and bizarre, but it makes sense. Frequently people who go through a near-death experience are overwhelmed by clarity. All their ambitions suddenly seem less important. They may quit a job or a bad habit; they may reconcile a relationship. What they really want to do is to make sure the people they love know they love them and to cultivate a character that leaves the world better than they found it.

This may seem like a strange Christmas sermon! But it is a relevant theme in Advent. In Advent, we are waiting for Jesus' coming—not just celebrating His first coming at Christmas but waiting for His second coming. Each week of Advent we have a different theme—today we lit the candle of Prayer. The church in which you grew up might have had different themes like Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. But in the early church, the four themes of Advent were Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. You can see why we have changed things a bit. Lighting the candle of Death doesn't bring out the Christmas spirit. But the point is not just that Jesus came one time but that He will come another time. This is a time to reflect and ask

ourselves, “Does my life right now look like I want it to look when Jesus does come?”

How does Peter tell us we need to change? In the final verses Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:13-14 ESV:

According to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness truly resides. Therefore, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found at peace, without spot or blemish.

When you hear, “*Strive to be found at peace, without spot or blemish,*” you might think Peter means something like, “I had better get my act together. I had better work harder, get holier, and prioritize better and fix everything.” You might be thinking about the sinful habits you need to stop and all the good work you need to do to make sure that you don’t get in trouble when the day of the Lord comes. So, you try really hard to do what is good. But then you mess up! So, you try even harder...and mess up again!

Here’s something that might surprise you—that’s not what Peter means! That’s not what the Bible is about! How can we be found at peace with Jesus without a spot or blemish? Peter tells us at the beginning of his letter in 2 Peter 1:3-4:

His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and goodness. By **these** he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature...

Look closely at these verses. What does Peter say is the key to living a life of godliness? It’s “*through the knowledge of him*” (2 Peter 1:3), Jesus. How do we receive these “*very great and precious promises*”? “These” refers to Jesus’ own glory and goodness. We don’t get a life of godliness or the promises of Jesus by being a good person or by working hard. Peter says—and this is the essential message of the Bible—that it’s not that you need to be a good person to experience eternity with God, but that Jesus was good **for** you so that you can experience eternity with God. You and I both know none of us are

“without spot or blemish.” The only one who was, as Peter says, was Jesus Himself. In his other letter, 1 Peter 1:18-19 (ESV), he writes, *“... you were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”* The only way we become spotless is through what Jesus has done for us. It is through the *“knowledge of him who called us”* that we received these *“very great and precious promises.”* The key to becoming the person God is making you into—which is all that you and I will have when we stand before Him—is simply growing more and more in relationship with Jesus.

What if every time you wait it is a reminder of the bigger thing you are waiting for? What if the next time you are waiting in a long line with a customer service rep at American Airlines, instead of ripping into the innocent customer service rep, you take standing in that line as an opportunity to become more like Jesus and treat the representative with kindness and those in line around you with patience? What if a red light on Bonita Beach Road is not an obstacle to plow through but a moment to pause in your busy day and give thanks to God for something? What if this season of your life—waiting for the right person, waiting to move somewhere, waiting for a diagnosis, waiting for the kids to grow up—is an opportunity to cultivate your character to become the person God is leading you to be?

1. Next time you have poor service at a restaurant, do something nice for your waiter. I was a waiter for six summers. You see the worst of people as they wait for their food! One mean comment from a customer can cause a chain reaction from the server to the head chef to the line cook. But someone who waits well and patiently can set a whole different tone. One very busy Friday night a customer saw that I was overwhelmed and left a little note in blue crayon, “Hang in there!” I kept that note in my ordering folder for the next six years. It is more worthwhile to wait well than to be frustrated at having to wait.

2. Next time you’re stuck in a line, look up or around

instead of looking at your phone. Instead of treating a long wait as a necessary evil, what if waiting were an opportunity? Maybe ten minutes of quiet waiting in a line is what you need in your day. Maybe you even get in the longer line. Take it as a chance to pray, a chance to ask a cashier how their day is going, a chance to hear the life story of the person next to you.

3. Next time God seems to be running late wonder what He is really up to. Jesus is not running late. He will arrive precisely when He is meant to. You can trust that one day, He will come back to right everything wrong on the earth, to judge evil, and to see how you have loved while you waited. So next time He seems to be delaying something in your life from a relationship to a retirement wonder what He might be up to. He has a purpose behind it.

We have one more week to wait until Christmas. How might we wait well? ■



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