

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Waiting for God**

*...those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint. – Isaiah 40:31*

In “Game of Thrones,” the popular series of novels and HBO television series, “Winter is Coming” is the motto of house Stark, one of the noble families who are vying for the throne. The motto expresses a pessimistic outlook, that no matter how sunny and bright things may seem now, winter is coming, and everything is going to get cold and dreary again. And that motto becomes something like a self-fulfilling prophesy; for the members of house Stark, there is always that dreary promise in the back of their heads that life inevitably will get worse. “Winter is Coming.”

The advertising poster for our church affiliated Camp Kasota East plays on that pop culture motif, but reverses it: “Summer is Coming” is the hopeful message of this years promotional poster. While “Winter is Coming” sounds dreary and pessimistic, “Summer is Coming” is optimistic and hopeful.

The difference between those two mottos illustrates an important truth in life: a lot depends on what you are waiting for. If you view the future as inevitably cold and bleak, then your outlook on life might well be a joyless resignation. But if you view the future as potentially filled with warmth and sunshine,

your whole outlook on life brightens. So here is the question for today: “what are you waiting for?”

The passage from Isaiah says, “Those who wait for God will renew their strength, they will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary. They will walk and not faint.” And the psalm says that those who trust in God will experience God’s protection and care. These passages are saying that when we open ourselves to the leading of the Spirit, we do in fact receive it.

There are times when we can choose to “wait for the Lord,” and there are other times when life circumstances force us to wait, and all we can do is decide how to wait and what to wait for.

- There is, for example, a teenager whose boyfriend has just broken up with her. She feels rejected, alone, worthless and unattractive. She hides in her room over the weekend, ashamed and embarrassed, wondering if this awful feeling will ever go away, wondering if she can ever love anyone again, ever trust anyone again, wondering what her future will hold. At some point her cries become prayers, longings for guidance and direction, and reassurance. She wonders who she is apart from this relationship. She is waiting for God.
- There is a man who for one reason or another had to leave his job. It isn’t obvious at first what path his career might go. It takes weeks and then months of financial stress and patient endurance as one hope after another is dashed, before he finds steady employment again. But during that time, he begins to ask questions about who he was apart from his job, and what God wants him to do with his life. It becomes much clearer to him what he really cares about, and what is really important. That too is a time of waiting for the Lord.
- There is a woman who is suffering from a debilitating illness. She can’t do many of the things she used to enjoy. She used to be athletic and physically fit, but now she feels her body has betrayed her. She is going through what one mystic called “the dark night of the soul,” waiting for the medical situation to become clearer, waiting for the Spirit to show her

where her life is going and what it all means. She too is waiting for the Lord.

- Another man has retired after a long and successful career in a field which he really enjoyed and found very fulfilling. All of a sudden he has all this time on his hands, and too few things to do with it. His sense of identity is shaken, because it is so tied to what he did for a living. He loses touch with many of his colleagues whom he had relied on for support and encouragement. The stress of retirement gives him heart trouble, and he might easily die. Many men do die shortly after retirement, but he survives, and eventually he finds that he now has time to spend with his spouse and his grandchildren and in volunteer work. He also has more time to savour the aroma of flowers and the taste of his evening meal. His priorities change, and his appreciation for life deepens. That too is a time of waiting for the Lord.

It isn't just individuals who wait for God:

- A company has been struggling along for years, its owners and managers trying to make headway against competitors and a stagnant market. Then they decide to rethink their mission. They consult customers and suppliers, work with consultants and marketing firms. They take their employees on retreats and ask questions about their passions and dreams, about how their business can not just profit, but contribute to the community. They step back from business as usual, and take the time to wait for a direction to become clear. They too are waiting on God.
- A congregation has a tough decision to make, about which participants are deeply divided. It could take the matter to a congregational meeting, have a raucous debate hold a vote and let those who lose the vote go home bitter and angry. Instead, they go through a process of discernment, of careful listening to each other in the trust that by listening deeply to each other, they are also listening deeply for the Spirit. They too are waiting for God.

Many people think of prayer as talking to God, but the image of waiting for God suggests that we ought rather to think of prayer primarily as listening, patiently, for God to speak to us. Many in our time are realizing that this

posture of attentive waiting for the leading of the Spirit is absolutely critical to our personal and communal well-being: bookstores have large sections on spirituality, health care professionals study spirituality because illness raises fundamental questions about peoples' sense of purpose in life and relationship with the sacred, Oprah tells stories about people tending their spirits. People are realizing that they need to wait for the Spirit's leading because often what it means to live a fully human life is not immediately obvious. We need to wait for the Spirit's leading because we may have lost the things that once gave our lives stability and direction and purpose, and we need to grieve their loss and wait for new stability and direction and purpose to emerge. We need to wait for the Spirit's leading all the time because it is too easy to get caught up in conventional patterns of life that are safe and familiar, but unsatisfying, even oppressive, and we may not be able to recognize that or to see a way beyond it until we have waited for God. Like Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, the road to wholeness often comes through rejecting the safe, conventional way, and following what Robert Frost called "the road less travelled."

So what does it mean to "wait for God"? What are these spiritual practices that the prophet Isaiah promises will renew our strength and help us to soar like eagles? One way of answering that question is simply to point to the things that people do in order to listen for the Spirit's leading. Many people set aside a few minutes each day to read and reflect on classic texts, meditate, sing spiritual songs, walk, or find a quiet space to reflect on where the Spirit is leading. Many people gather in small groups where they can share their deepest questions, doubts and hopes, and engage in dialogue. And weekly, many of us gather to wait upon God in the hope that we will be shaped more and more into the mind of Christ. Many people periodically go on spiritual retreats, pilgrimages and other ways of varying the rhythm of life to open ourselves to the leading of the Spirit. And many people engage in acts of service and witness that break out of the usual boxes of looking after ourselves and our families to open ourselves to the presence of God in other people and creation. These are all ways of making sacred space, of setting aside time to wait for God. It is too easy to drift aimlessly with the currents of daily routine and social expectation if we do not consciously set aside time to check out where we have come from and where we are going and decide to change course from time to time.

Waiting for God is not easy; it can often be agonizing. But in the end, it is true that God is worth the wait. For it remains true, now as much as ever, that “those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

