

“The Waiting Place”

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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Most of them have common characteristics: durable, all-purpose furniture; magazines, new and old, covering a wide range of topics; lovely music programmed by the same people who select elevator songs; and the most interesting collection of people.

Waiting rooms are not our favorite places, are they? I don't believe I have ever met anyone who looked forward to spending time in one.

However, we find ourselves peering into a waiting room in today's text. The Apostle Paul is there waiting to receive word that he can return to Thessalonica to see his friends so he can check on the work he began and turned over to these new believers. Listen as I share more details.

Thessalonica, founded in 315 BCE by King Cassander of Macedon and named for the half-sister of Alexander the Great, was the second largest city in Greece during Paul's lifetime. It was a thriving seaport city, which made it a major economic, industrial, commercial and political center.

Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey and sowed the seeds for the first Christian church in that area. His visit was cut short after only three weeks when his life was threatened by the leaders of the synagogue where he preached. They did not want to hear any more about the good news of Jesus and did not want Paul staying in their city.

Paul left Timothy and Silas in Thessalonica to cultivate the gospel seeds. Sometime later, Timothy traveled to Corinth to see Paul and give him an update on the work. To Paul's delight,

Timothy told him the new Christians in Thessalonica were united in their love for one another, faithful to God in spite of the hardships they were enduring and cooperating with their leaders to build upon the foundation Paul laid. Timothy also told Paul the Thessalonians longed for his return so they could listen to him teach and renew their warm relationship.

Needless to say, Paul was humbled and encouraged by Timothy's warm message. Listen to the words Paul wrote and Timothy delivered back to the Thessalonians.

“But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now, may our God and Father himself of the Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.” (1 Thessalonians 3:6-13)

You may be wondering why this text has been selected today. What is the connection between Advent and this passage?

Advent is a time of waiting. The four weeks prior to Christmas are days of anticipation and preparation as Christians look toward the celebration of Christ's birth.

One purpose of Advent is to remind us that much of life is about waiting, as Paul had to do in Corinth waiting for God to make it possible for him to return to Thessalonica. Rarely, if ever, do dreams come true quickly. Waiting is a way of life common to all of us.

Perhaps you are familiar with the children's book, "Oh, the Places You'll Go." It was written by the great Lutheran theologian, Dr. Seuss.

His real name was Theodor Seuss Geisel, an American writer and cartoonist most widely known for his children's books, which were known for their imaginative characters and rhyme. I suspect the two most famous books he wrote were "Cat in the Hat" and "Green Eggs and Ham."

"Oh, the Places You'll Go" was the last book published before his death. The main character decides to leave town and this book chronicles the challenges he faces along his journey. One of those challenges is 'The Waiting Place'.

"You can get so confused that you'll start in to race down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space, headed, I fear, toward a most useless place...The Waiting Place...for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go

or a bus to come, or a plane to go

or the mail to come, or the rain to go

or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow

or waiting around for a Yes or No

or waiting for their hair to grow.

Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for the fish to bite

Or waiting for wind to fly a kite

Or waiting around for Friday night

Or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake

Or a pot to boil or a Better Break

Or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants

Or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.

Everyone is just waiting.

What are you waiting for now? Are you waiting to hear from that interview? Are you waiting for the economy to improve so your business will pick up? Are you waiting for your health to be restored so you can resume your normal activities? Are you waiting for a family member to work with you on repairing a relationship? Are you waiting on someone to grow up and be responsible? Are you waiting for your ship to come in so you can relax and enjoy life?

Waiting is not easy, is it? You can tell from Paul's writings he was struggling with his inability to go to Thessalonica so he could see the people he grew to love in such a short time.

"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face," Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. Obviously, this was on his mind constantly.

The longer we must wait for our dreams to come true, the harder it can get. We can grow restless and weary. We can get despondent and give up hope.

So, what are we to do while we wait to avoid feelings of despair and hopelessness? What did Paul do? For starters, he did not sit idle twiddling his thumbs.

He spent a considerable amount of time in prayer asking God to open a door that would make it possible for him to return to Thessalonica. Every morning began this way and each day concluded with this request.

Paul also prayed for the Christians he left behind. He asked God to bless them and to help them to be good to one another and faithful to the one they now called Lord. He prayed that God would help the Thessalonians to be good role models by loving all people, including their enemies, and to be ambassadors for Christ by living holy and blameless lives.

Like Jesus, Paul enlisted the help of others who would listen to him when he needed to talk, pray for him as he sought God's guidance and go places he could not. Timothy and Silas

were two members of his support group. They stayed close to Paul, and at his bidding, went to Thessalonica to supervise the work going on there.

Paul wrote letters to the believers in Thessalonica, assuring them of his love and prayers while instructing them in the faith. His inability to travel did not prevent him from staying in touch with the people he longed to see.

As a matter of fact, most scholars believe First Thessalonians was the first written book of the New Testament. This means the New Testament, as we know it, has its roots in The Waiting Place.

I wonder what you could do in the Waiting Place that would make this time in your life more productive and meaningful. How could you use the time between the birth and fulfilment of your dreams to your advantage? What could you do so you do not give up hope and give in to despair?

Follow Paul's example. Quit looking at what you cannot do or have no ability to change and do what you can.

You see, life's Waiting Place is quite different from a typical waiting room where people stare at a floor or leaf through old magazines. Life's waiting room is to be an active place where we focus on the work we can accomplish while we are waiting for our hopes and dreams to become reality.

In light of this, begin where Paul did. *Pray about your heart's desires, always seeking God's will and trusting God to respond to your prayers as a loving and responsible parent would.* Ask God to give you wisdom, guidance, understanding, patience, stamina and hope while you are waiting for doors of opportunity to open.

Ask God to help you walk through the doors that do open, even if they are not the ones you requested. God opens these doors for two reasons. You need the people you will encounter on the other side of those thresholds and there are people who need what you have to offer that can help them along their journey.

Among many things, God is a matchmaker, always connecting needs with resources. Wherever you are and whatever you are going through, God is there to bring people into your life you need and to make you an answer to someone else's prayer.

So, ask God to help you open your heart, home and life to those traveling with you on this journey. Turn strangers into friends, as Paul admonished his readers to do. Draw close to others who are also waiting for their hopes and dreams to come to fruition so you can pray for one another and offer words of encouragement to each other.

Do you recall what Mary did after being told by the angel Gabriel that she was going to have a baby? She immediately went to the hill country of Judea and stayed with Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, for three months.

Why did Mary do this? She needed a safe and comfortable Waiting Place where she would find encouragement and support. Mary needed a friend who would listen to her as she talked about her confusion, anxiety and fears, and someone who would help her deal with the challenges she was facing. Elizabeth and Zechariah provided that safe haven.

At the same time, Elizabeth needed a younger person to help her in the final months of her pregnancy, for she, too, was going to have a baby even at her advanced age. God brought them together at just the right time, and God wants to do the same for you.

The Waiting Place may not be our favorite place, but it is not a place devoid of God's presence. Draw close to God during this time in your life, and allow God to help you so you can then be a blessing to others. This is an Advent lesson we need to hear, not only prior to Christmas, but all year long.

There is one more thing I believe we need to pray for while we are in The Waiting Room. *Ask God to help you know when it is time to leave The Waiting Room and move in new directions.*

After a while, we can become comfortable in a waiting room and stay longer than necessary. There is no shortage of magazines to read and interesting people to watch. We can

grow complacent while waiting and become fearful about leaving and traveling down unfamiliar roads.

It takes courage to leave The Waiting Place, especially if you have been there for some time. Ask God to take your hand and lead you down this new path.

Do you recall how Dr. Seuss ends the book, "Oh, the Places You'll Go?"

So...

Be your name Buxbaum or Brixby or Bray

Or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,

You're off to Great Places!

Today is your day!

Your mountain is waiting.

So...get on your way!