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Date: April 19, 2020,
Sermon: "Waiting With Purpose and Plan"
Scripture: Acts 1:3-11
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Acts 1:3-11

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This,' he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Can you stand a little Coronavirus humor? I insisted on preaching today because this might be the last Sunday I can see with my hair growing down over my face, returning me to my glory hair days of the 1960s.

We all had our wake-up call for this pandemic that made us pay attention. Maybe it was March Madness canceled. Broadway theaters closed. Frightening news reports. Churches shut. With each dramatic response, more Americans took notice.

I hate to admit it, but I was breezing through it for a while until my barber canceled. I go up to New Haven for my haircuts, and yes, my favorite bookstore

was closed, and yes, my favorite coffeehouses were closed, but my barber said he'd come in just for me. But the day before my appointment, he canceled. That got my attention!

Now, Alida has offered. But there's nothing scarier than seeing Alida with scissors in one hand and a bowl in the other, trying to recreate the Beatles' haircut. I don't care how many YouTube videos she's watched on barbering, it's not happening on my head.

Another virus observation I must get off my chest. Dog manure is piling up on the greens all around the Church, and I finally figured out why:

- A. Dogs are now being walked by the spouse who never, ever used to walk the dog and is not equipped or inclined to clean up.
- B. Some dogs are being walked that were never walked before.
- C. Some poor dogs are being walked a million times a day by stir-crazy families who also have never walked that much before. So the evidence is piling up.

Those are three of my observations after the first month of isolation. Oh, I have plenty more. Go to the "senior citizen hour" at a supermarket, 6:30 to 7:30 AM. You young people complain about old people driving too slowly? No, not at senior hour at the supermarket. They are crazy and dangerous. Or, how about Zoom behavior? You know how people used to talk about everybody having a crazy uncle? On Zoom, everybody is that "crazy uncle." Well, you and I could both go on and on.

Meanwhile, we're all waiting. For warmer weather. For a vaccine. For schools to reopen, games to begin. For hugs. Plans are afoot to reopen . . . or not. And we are all left hanging by a thread, hoping one day to go to a restaurant, inside; to go on vacation, to go to the library, the beach, heck, to go to the barber!

What does the Bible say about this? That's what preachers do when big things happen—good or bad—we go to the Bible to find some parallels. Looking for instruction, inspiration, help.

When the dog manure hit the fan a month ago, all of us preachers went to that wonderful story in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus and his friends are out on a boat, a big storm rages out of nowhere, scaring everybody half to death, and they beg Jesus to do something . . . And he does. He calms, quiets the storm. (Matthew 8:23-27)

Just what we're all are yearning for in this season of pandemic storm: for God, Dr. Fauci, Chloroquine, distancing, miracle, medicine, prayer to quiet the storm.

"By whatever means necessary." That's another Bible quote. Everybody thinks Malcolm X said it, but that was St. Paul, determined to get the story of God's love in Jesus Christ out to the world "by whatever means necessary." Now we preachers are scouring the Bible for tips on how to deal with this season of waiting "by whatever means necessary."

When did people have to wait in the Bible? And how did they accomplish it? I was reminded by one TV preacher of the first widespread quarantine in the Bible. When the Jews were slaves in Egypt, God tried every trick in the book to convince the Egyptians to set the Jewish slaves free. You probably remember the "Ten Plagues" God sent, some funnier than others: like a plague of frogs. Can you imagine your whole country, your whole town, your whole school, your whole house filled with frogs?

There was also a plague of gnats. I used to live in southern Georgia. We had a plague of gnats six months of the year. You know how everyone uses and hoards Purell with this pandemic? In Georgia, we hoarded Avon Skin So Soft, the only antidote to gnats.

And God sent a plague of flies. Have you ever been in New Hampshire or Maine during black fly season in June or July? You seriously could lose your mind.

Plagues and pandemics can do that, like now. Stuck in our houses. Eating canned food long past its expiration date. Playing board games we always hated. Watching movies that we refused to go to when they were in the theaters, rereading books we didn't like the first time, and watching Cable news. Now, that's a plague that would have scared the Egyptians. But alas, no TV back then.

So God sent a horrible plague of death down into Egypt, touching everything and everyone except the Israelites. They were quarantined. Seriously. God told them to stay in their houses. Shut their doors. "Shelter in place." "Social distancing" themselves from everything else in Egypt. At which point the Angel of Death passed over—yes, it was "Passover!" It passed over the Israelites, allowing them to live, while sadly, Egyptians died tragically. The next day, the Israelites, liberated by God, left Egypt after 400 years of slavery. (Exodus 12:21-23) That's a lot of waiting that was successfully ended by quarantine.

The other waiting-it-out quarantine story is from today's Scripture, perfect for the days after Easter. You know the basic story: Jesus is crucified on Good Friday. Dead all day Saturday. And miraculously alive on Easter Sunday. Then, the Bible tells us (and we talked about this last week), then, "Jesus showed himself to people and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He did this, the Bible says, for 40 days and spoke about the Kingdom of God. On one occasion, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem but wait . . . wait" You see

that word? "Wait for the gift God has promised." The gift they were waiting for is described vaguely as some kind of "power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," (Acts 1:3-8), which, to be honest, made no sense to them. So they were to wait for some indeterminate amount of time for some inexplicable end result. Sort of like us, now. We are waiting, and we don't know for what or when.

Frankly, I'm the least patient person on earth, so maybe I can learn about waiting from these two Bible stories. The Israelites quarantined in Egypt. The Disciples stuck isolated in Jerusalem. Both groups of people waiting. Both groups expectant, both nervous, both in danger, both obedient to God. Well, the Israelites were fortified by a purpose; the Disciples were fortified by a plan.

For the Israelites, God was promising them a way out and a way forward. A way out of Egypt. A way out of bondage. A way forward toward freedom. A way forward to the Promised Land. But to get that and to get there, first they needed to stay put, to forego their regular routine, to "shelter in place," to isolate themselves from outside dangers. They did that for the promise of what lay beyond their self-quarantine. There was a reward beyond their sacrifice. Their quarantine served a purpose.

For the Disciples, what made the waiting worthwhile was the idea that Jesus gave them—that he had a plan for their life. That it would take discipline, preparation, and patience. Patience is just a nicer word for "waiting."

When I first moved here, my office was in a depressing corner of the second floor of the before-the-renovation Church House. Nearby was a bathroom with Sears, Roebuck & Co. wallpaper. Not torn from the catalog, but wallpaper made to look like the pages of the old-timey Sears catalogs. Most of you won't remember that, but step back in time when Sears, Roebuck was the mother of all stores *and* the mother of all catalogs. Anyway, my bathroom wallpaper featured both ads for every conceivable item plus pithy tidbits of wisdom. One proverb was perfect for a sermon about waiting. It was advice to young married couples: "Don't expect to start off where your parents ended." In other words, you are 23, you just got married; your parents drive a first-class, brand-new luxury car and live in a wonderfully landscaped Connecticut home. That's not going to be your first car or your first house. But if you work hard, as they did, and save, as they did, and plan, as they did, and live with a purpose, as they did, and wait, as they did, it might work out for you. Lots of things in life require waiting: maturity, progress, healing, family life, career, promotion, success, child-rearing, teenager-rearing, dog-rearing!

If you love baseball, you know that in modern baseball as a batter you are taught to "wait for your pitch," that perfect pitch you know you can hit. You know why I'm a preacher today instead of in easy retirement after a Hall of Fame baseball

career? Because I never waited. I was old-school. Swing at anything within reach. Swing at the first pitch that's anywhere near the plate. I got base hits hitting balls over my head, balls thrown at my head, balls that hit the dirt before I swung. I could get away with that at age 11, 15, 19. Eventually my lack of waiting caught up with me. My "swing at anything" bravado petered out, so I'm a preacher.

My point today is simple. Waiting isn't doing nothing. Waiting isn't passive or wasted time or lost time. Waiting, with a purpose and plan, can be God's design to get us where God needs us to be. Liberated from needless danger. Liberated from fear. Liberated from enslavement to anything or anyone. *And* ready to take up the Good News of Jesus Christ and bring it to a world yearning for Good News.

Let me close with this story. On Wednesday, we delivered almost \$1,000 worth of much-needed food supplies to Pivot House. Everything from paprika to rice to pork, from paper towels to vinegar to eggs. While unloading Alida's van, a young man, maybe 20 years old at most, came up to Alida and asked if she knew where he could get a meal. She took him over to a table in the driveway—they call it "the blessing table"—where extra food is left for anyone in need. And very quickly, Alida also gave him some money. A few minutes later, as the young man was about to walk away, he turned to Alida and said, "That was very real. That was genuine. That was of God."

My dear Church family, we will get through this pandemic. Our waiting serves a great purpose and a great plan, preparing us to be unleashed in ways that are very real, very genuine, and of God.

Our final hymn, a beautiful old hymn of faith, is "If You Will Trust in God to Guide You."

*If you will trust in God to guide you
and hope in God through all your ways,
God will give strength, whate'er betide you,
and bear you through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
builds on the rock that will not move.*

*God will embrace your pain and weeping,
your helpless anger and distress.
If you are in God's care and keeping,
in sorrow will God love you less?
For Christ, who took for us a cross,
will bring you safe through every loss*

*Sing, pray, and keep God's ways unswerving;
so do your own part faithfully,
and trust God's word; though undeserving,
you'll find God's promise true to be.
God never will forsake in need
the soul that trusts in God indeed.*