

BELPRES CHURCH

The Wait Room

Habakkuk 2:1-13, Psalm 13

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Good to see all of you, thank you for being here. Those of you in the room, those of you joining online, happy First Sunday of Advent. Glad to be in worship together with you.

There's a supposedly true story from the early 1900s about a train waiting to cross a drawbridge. Back then, there'd be a watchman who would swing a lantern if the drawbridge was up and it wasn't safe to cross. But if the train didn't see the lantern, then it was safe to cross. So the train crossed and fell into the water below because the drawbridge was up, and there'd been no lantern, and a bunch of merchandise got damaged. So folks sued the company that operated the bridge.

At the trial, the watchman was called as one of the witnesses, and the lawyer just grilled him. "Were you on duty the night of the accident?" he asked. The watchman said, "Yeah." "Were you drunk?" "No." "Did you wave the lantern to warn the train?" "Yes." And it went on like this, and his testimony helped the bridge company win the case.

Well, afterwards, someone asked him, "Man, did all those questions make you nervous?" The watchman said, "Oh yeah, super nervous. I was afraid he was gonna ask if the lantern was lit." Didn't ask the right question.

What that shows is that often in life, the right question is more important than the answers. It's like Isaac Newton, who saw an apple fall from a tree and from that deduced the law of gravity. Apples have been falling from trees forever. Newton's genius was to ask the right question: Why did it fall?

We're starting a sermon series called *The Questions That Christmas Asks*. Throughout the Christmas stories in the Bible, various characters ask different questions, like, "How can this be?" or "Where will we find this Christ child?" In all, there are six questions that

people ask in the Christmas narratives in Scripture. Each one of those questions tells us something about God, about ourselves, about our hopes, and about our fears.

But hovering over all those six questions is another question that actually does not appear in the Christmas narrative but would have been the question on everybody's mind—that everyone was asking—and it's the question that, in many ways, drives the entire story: *How long, Lord? How long?*

When Jesus was born, there had not been a prophet in Israel for 400 years to speak God's word to them. Basically, they had not heard a sermon in 400 years. And some of you right now might be thinking, "Wow, that sounds great. That's a good thing, right?" Okay, that's just hurtful. No need for that.

To them, it felt like God was silent. He wasn't, but it felt that way. Meanwhile, they had been conquered by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally by the Romans. They had been waiting 400 years for a Messiah, a deliverer. Psalm 74 says, "We are given no signs from God. No prophets are left. How long will the enemy mock you, God? Why do you hold back your hand?" Psalm 13 says, "How long, Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I have sorrow in my heart? How long, Lord?" Do you ever ask that? *How long?*

How long until I find someone to marry? How long until this health crisis gets better? How long until I get promoted? How long until I can retire? How long until this marriage gets better? How long until my kids return to their faith? How long until there's reconciliation in my estranged family? How long do I have to wait?

Now, it needs to be said, often God moves very quickly, and we don't have to wait at all. He sometimes moves very fast. Other times, we do have to wait for various reasons. And there's a lot of waiting in the Bible. Abraham waits 25 years for the son that God promised him. The Israelites wander for 40 years in the desert until they get to the promised land.

This is the first Sunday in Advent, that time of year when we wait and prepare ourselves for Christmas and Jesus' arrival. But also during Advent, we remember that we are waiting for Jesus to come again. But what we see in the Bible is that waiting has been too good for too many people for too long to be all bad. Because biblical waiting produces power, hope, and joy.

Which is kind of counter to our culture, right? We are a very impatient culture. We have same-day delivery, we speed date, we eat fast food, try the one-weekend diet, speak in half sentences, start things but don't finish, move on to the next thing. But our impatience can do a lot of damage. It hurts relationships when we're impatient with people. When we honk, when we push our way to the front of the line, it creates a culture of disrespect.

Plus, like fine wine aging, some of the best things in life just take time and waiting. But biblical waiting is not just passively sitting around waiting for something to happen. Biblical waiting is active, and it's not discouraging. Biblical waiting is empowering.

And we see this in the prophet Habakkuk, who lived in a time of crisis in Israel—lots of injustice, people were suffering—and the very first words of his book: "How long, O Lord, shall I cry for help and you will not listen? How long do I have to look at all the problems in my world and in my life and you do nothing?" And then God says to Habakkuk, "Oh, actually, I'm about to do something. The Babylonians are going to conquer you and take you into exile for 70 years." And Habakkuk's like, "That's not a good thing, Lord, FYI." Now, God goes on to say that the exile is eventually actually going to strengthen Israel and make them better, but in the meantime, they have to wait.

So Habakkuk says, "I will stand at my watch, station myself on the ramparts. I will look to see what he will say to me. For the revelation awaits an appointed time. Though it linger, wait for it. It will certainly come." That's God's promise.

This passage tells us six ways that waiting can be empowering, and I'm going to use the six questions that journalists are taught to ask of every news story: Who, what, where, when, why, and how. And when we're waiting, the word of those six that we are focused on is *what*. We're focused on what we're waiting for—marriage, promotion, retirement, the health crisis to go away. We focus on the *what* that we're waiting for. And that's normal, we all do it. But it's also disempowering and discouraging because we're focused on what we don't have.

Biblical waiting focuses on the other five words that bring power, hope, and joy. So first, more important than *what* we wait for is *who* we wait on. Habakkuk says, "I will look to see what he will say." What's he focused on? He's focused on God. Psalm 13 begins, "How long, Lord, will you forget me forever?" But by the end, the psalmist is saying, "But I trust in your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me." Where's his focus? It's on God, not the things that he wants God to give him. Focus on God, on God himself. And it's okay to go to God for the things we want. That's great. It's just we don't want to stay there.

Because when we move past wanting what God can give us, to just wanting God, all those other things become less significant to us, because the presence of God is more fulfilling than all of those other things.

To wait on God means we focus on Him. And we trust His timing. Because so often when we're waiting, we're anxious, thinking, "Oh, X, Y, and Z isn't happening, and unless those things happen, then my life is going to be a disaster."

Are you sure? Do you know it's going to be a disaster? Can you predict the future? I mean, God knows more than we do. As humans, we have sent probes past our solar

system, but we still haven't figured out how to merge effectively onto a freeway. Like, God knows more than we do.

And part of waiting with power, hope, and joy is realizing that we don't know everything. Maybe this waiting matters for some reason we don't yet see. So we're going to trust God, and keep our eyes on Him.

Second, more important than what we wait for is why the waiting matters. Because with Jesus, waiting is never without purpose. There's always purpose in the waiting.

In the Bible, after the Israelites get out of slavery in Egypt, it takes them a couple of weeks to get to the promised land. But then they're afraid to go in because there are giants, and they fear that God won't help them conquer the giants. They don't have faith in God. So God says, "You're not ready for the promised land. You have a disempowered victim mentality," and so they wander in the wilderness for 40 years to develop stronger faith.

This goes to show that sometimes our waiting is self-inflicted. God is actually moving faster, but we're the ones delaying things. But God used the waiting because, in those 40 years in the wilderness, they developed a legal system, a government, an army—things they didn't need when they were slaves in Egypt, but things they would need in order to be a nation.

It took God just a few weeks to get them out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of them. But it wasn't wasted. It had purpose.

When I was in high school, I had the worst PE teacher ever in history. He would only allow the guys on his varsity basketball team to do PE—like even the JV people couldn't do it. But the rest of us, he just sent to the weight room to sit there until the hour was over while the varsity team did PE, and we were just waiting in the weight room. But I got bored in the weight room, so I started lifting weights, and I got really big.

When you're in the "weight room," W-A-I-T, weight room, you're adding muscle. You're growing. Something is happening. God is developing something in you as you wait. Always. He's making you more like Jesus if you wait with Him. Or you're getting closer to Him because you're praying more. Or He's developing skills or characteristics in you that you're going to need for whatever is in your future.

Maybe you're not ready for that promotion. Maybe you're not ready for marriage yet. And if you got it now, you'd just mess it up because you're not ready—just like the Israelites weren't ready for the promised land.

Here's the thing: in the weight room, when I was pushing those weights, no matter how hard I pushed, no matter how often I pushed those weights, they never changed, but I did. I got bigger. So when you are in the weight room, waiting around, and it doesn't feel like anything is changing, remember: you are. You are, if you're waiting with Jesus.

And in the end, you'll thank God for the delay and say, "Thank you for this waiting. What I learned during waiting was so important. I'm so glad I had to wait. Thank you, God. I wasn't ready for the thing I was waiting for. If you'd have given it to me then, I would have just messed it up."

God will come through, maybe not the way we expect, but it will still be good. And often, it's even better than what we were waiting for. Habakkuk says, "The vision will come at its appointed time—the right time, when we're ready for it."

So when we're waiting, what we need to do is ask Jesus this question: "Jesus, show me how you're developing me in this waiting so that I can participate in it." Because biblical waiting is not passive; it's active. We participate in our own growth.

Third, more important than what we wait for is how we wait—namely, expectantly. Habakkuk says, "I station myself on the ramparts." Ramparts are towers where the watchmen are stationed. Psalm 130 uses the same imagery of watchmen that Habakkuk does, and it says, "I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning."

How do watchmen wait for the morning? Are they like, "I wonder if morning is going to come"? No, they know it's coming, and they're waiting for it, expecting it. Wait like that, expecting God is going to do something good. Maybe not the thing we hope for, maybe not the picture we have in our heads, but something different than what we think should happen, and it will still be good.

And I know we often wait through some really painful, difficult things. We wait for a "not yet" that feels like a "not ever." But even in those painful times, God's presence brings strength.

One of the best examples of this is African American slaves in the South living through horrible injustice that was not of their own making, waiting for centuries with incredible, inspiring faith, finding strength through Jesus' presence. Meanwhile, they developed a vibrant culture that included gospel and spirituals that have enriched the entire church worldwide.

In the midst of that evil, they waited expectantly that God was going to do something—that God was doing something—that God was working even if they couldn't see it. And that's an example for all of us as we go through hard times.

Next, more important than what we wait for is when we wait. What I mean by that is when we're waiting, we often focus on our future. "When I get married, then my life will begin. When I graduate, when I get that promotion, when this health thing goes away, when the kids grow up and leave the house, and then they come back... when, when, when."

But here's the thing: we wait in the now, and there are blessings in the now. And part of waiting is asking Jesus to show us the good things He's doing now, not when we get to the thing we're waiting for.

I have a friend who's been single way longer than he wanted, and waiting has been really painful for him. But I remember one time years ago, when I was sort of in the middle of raising kids, doing this job, going to games, driving kids here and there—just super busy—and my whole life felt like "have to" and no "get to." It was all obligation. I was walking down Main Street on a sunny day, and there was my single friend, sitting at an outdoor table with a cool frosty drink in his hand, reading a book by himself.

I said, "I know you want to be married and have a family, and that's awesome. But I just need to say that this stage of life that I'm in right now—everything in me wants to be you." The freedom to just sit at an outdoor table and read.

Waiting for a family is painful, but there are still good things in the middle of that. There were advantages to that. And for that matter, when I look back on those busy years, I miss them and I wish I had savored them more. I was so focused on trying to get through it all. I wish I had paused more and said, "You know, stop trying to get to some future state and enjoy right now."

Some of you have heard me say that a few years ago, when my oldest daughter graduated from college, she said, "Just think, Dad, there was a time when you picked me up for the last time, and neither of us knew it was the last time." Oh, stick a spear through my heart, why don't you?

So I said, "Well, I could pick you up now," and she said, "No, that would be weird."

I wish I'd savored it more, knowing that it wasn't going to last forever. But I was so focused on getting where I needed to get.

More important than what we wait for is who we wait on, why the waiting matters, how we wait expectantly, when we wait, and finally, where. We do our waiting in two places: we wait in community—other people to help us discern what God is teaching us and how He's shaping our character as we wait. We wait in community. And in the second place, we wait in Scripture, to help us see God's purpose in our waiting.

One of the action steps for this week is the Bible reading plan. We're doing another one, and it's composed of passages about the coming of Jesus, including prophecies about Him given 500 years before His birth, and they talk about waiting. One of the ways we wait well is to wait in Scripture, with Scripture, to encourage us.

We actually ran out of the physical copies of the Bible reading plan, which is a great problem to have. But you can get them on our website or on the app, and next week, hopefully, we'll have more physical copies for you.

The second action step for this week is just to ask Jesus to show you what He's doing in your waiting. Maybe He's developing skills in you that you're going to need or growing your character in some way. Ask Him to show you what He's doing in your waiting because it's never passive; it's always active.

When we see what Jesus is doing, waiting is less discouraging because we see the purpose in it.

When I lived in California, I had a single friend who really wanted to be married. Not the single guy I just told you about, but another one. His biggest goal in life, the thing he wanted more than anything else, was to be a husband and father. But it wasn't working out. Through prayer and input from his friends, he began to see how God might be using that time of waiting to grow and shape him.

He realized he had some deep issues from his past that he hadn't dealt with, and that he wasn't ready for marriage yet. So he started seeing a Christian therapist to work on those issues. He also began to mentor younger people at work, some of whom didn't have great dads, and he became a role model and father figure to them.

He started to travel a lot, went on short-term mission trips, and got to a point where he said, "You know what? I'm actually good. My life is really full right now. I've never been closer to Jesus. Through all this waiting for a spouse, I've become more like Him. I've got these great friends. I get to have all of these adventures. If I never get married, it'll be fine. I'm fine the way I am."

A few years later, in his late 40s, he met a woman who had been married before, and she already had grown children and grandkids. He said, "This is not what I planned, but there are some things about this that are better." He became a father figure to her children, and an instant grandfather. He realized that all the waiting, all that growth in him, had prepared him for this moment.

If you had told him in his 20s that this would be how it turned out, he would have been disappointed. But he realized it was better than what he'd planned.

So the question isn't what you're waiting for; it's who you're waiting on, why the waiting matters, how you wait expectantly in the present—not in the future—and trusting that you will see the goodness of God.

At the very end of his book, Habakkuk says: "Yet I will wait patiently, for the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen, and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior."

Another word for faith is "yet"—which he uses twice in just these few verses. Though I can't see it now, though I don't know what He's doing, though it seems like nothing is

happening—yet I will hope. Yet I will participate in what God is doing. Yet I will celebrate and have joy, because the last word does not belong to me or my problems. The last word belongs to Jesus, and my eyes are on Him.

So, Jesus, as we wait for whatever it is we're waiting for this Advent, help us to keep our eyes on You, not on what we can get from You, not on the thing we're waiting for—just on You, Jesus. Help us to trust You, help us to see how You're using the waiting in our lives to shape us, and help us to participate with You in that, so that we become the people You are creating us to be.

We pray this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God and what do we learn about people as we reflect on this passage?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What does the phrase "wait on the Lord" mean to you?
- What helps you "wait on the Lord"?
- Has there ever been a time when you waited for something and did not get it, but God gave you something better?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.