

Peter Bankson: Wait for the Lord

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Introduction

This is a memorable day in our life together as a little part of the Body of Christ. It is the first Sunday worship **after** our formal [farewell](#) to our birthplace as a congregation. ... Here we are, in the same familiar room. We have said our goodbyes, but we still have a bit longer to wait. Moreover, we do not really know how long that wait will be. I am hoping for Easter, but there is still a lot to do. When I read the ending of the psalm for this week, it had a different ring: "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"

Wait for the Lord

Waiting has never been a strong suite for me. As you well know, I have been much more comfortable when I am "busy," working on something, particularly something that I think someone else needs. That is how it is with us Enneagram "Twos," we need to be needed, and we are at our best when we feel like we are being good Scouts: "Helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent." Nothing wrong with that ... until you burn out, that is. By the time I became an Eagle Scout, I had learned a lot about doing good turns but not a lot about waiting.

The psalm for this week, Psalm 27, became part of my Scripture foundation a long time ago. When I was living and working in Duc Pho, Viet Nam, as the district advisor, the opening lines of Psalm 27 often comforted me:

*The Lord is my saving light; whom shall I fear?
God is my fortress; what should I dread?*

*When the violent come at me to eat me alive,
a mob eager to kill – they waver, they collapse.*

*Should battalions lay siege, I will not fear;
should war rage against me, even then will I trust.*

There was a war going on all around me, and I needed some sense of assurance that my life's work was more than being a live target for North Vietnamese Army training, as they got ready to take on the bigger, stronger American Army units just to the South. Psalm 27 didn't explain why fear didn't make any sense to the psalmist, but having those words available helped bring a sense of calm as we waited through those dark nights. I did not know what was going on inside me, but I had a strong dose of mystery before I went, and I was willing to let this comfort simply "be" there for me while I waited for the year to end. That was a good hint that God is far bigger than I will ever understand.

As I came to Seekers Church, and began to put down some roots in the tradition of the [Church of the Saviour](#), one thing I had to deal with was all the silence and stillness that marks the inner journey – a daily time for silence and reflection ... meditation ... journaling ... prayer. I started going on silent retreat and found that if I worked at it I could let myself be still – on the outside. Most of the time, though, this silence was marked by shifting gears but not shutting off the engine. I could walk around Dayspring and marvel at the complexity of

God's Creation; I could gather bunches of dried grass to make an organic setting for our altar table ... or write a poem ... or wrap a rock. However, I could not just sit there and do nothing. It was as though the short time of a silent retreat was too precious to waste by simply waiting!

It has only been in the last decade or so that I have begun to watch with delight as others of you take naps on silent retreat, or let yourselves sit on the porch and wait for lunch. Waiting out there has become easier for me than waiting like that here in town. Here, the river of life runs fast, through a narrow canyon, over big rocks. There is more whitewater in the river of life here than in most other places, and time for drifting and dreaming is hard to find. I think that is one reason why so many of us hunger for the sanctuary of silent retreat.

Sometimes, we simply have to wait. If it is too wet to pour concrete, we have to wait. If the doctor takes longer than scheduled with the patient ahead of you, you have to wait. If everyone wants to see The Passion on the same night, you have to wait. In addition, the election is not scheduled until next November – eight months from now. Can we take heart from the words of a fresh translation of the end of Psalm 27?

*"I know I will see how good God is while I am still alive.
Trust in the Lord. Be strong. Be brave. Trust in the Lord."*

What might these tidy nostrums mean for us, right now at the beginning of Lent 2004, as we wait for the paint to dry at Carroll Street ... right now as we watch the troop rotation send fresh American forces into Iraq ... as the debate flares over who should lead the government in the years to come? What does it mean, for you, for me, for us, to "trust in the Lord; be strong; and be brave?" How might we sharpen our practice in the waiting, and learn to trust in God?

Be Strong and Let Your Heart Take Courage

I asked to preach today because I wanted some way to mark the occasion of my 65th birthday tomorrow. For a long time, I did not know many people who were this old. I spent my early adult years in the Army, which does not have much room for the elderly. Even the greybeards retired by the time they reached 50. Turning 65 seemed like a major milestone; it is a point at which you suddenly became disconnected from life in the fast lane and you began your final time of waiting. Having spent the past 28 years here at Seekers Church, and remembering as many of you passed this point, I can see that it is not that simple. It feels like while the milestone I have reached may be new to me, it has a familiar shape. I think I have learned from my experience, but there are always those surprising new things from God.

The older I get, the clearer I am that there is a whole lot that I do not know. I do not know how we will make it to Carroll Street. I do not know how we will get ourselves out of Iraq. It is a time of unknowing. As we gathered this morning for worship, we joined our voices in the call to worship, which said, "Today we seek to learn how unknowing allows us to pass through the valley of the shadow of death."

When I realized that this week would raise this confession from our liturgy up beside the psalmist's admonition, and that we would still be here after the farewell party, I knew I wanted to look at how we wait in times of unknowing. I wanted to share with you my own sense of hope – I know I will see how good God is while I am still alive. Nevertheless, I thought, that will take about three minutes, and you would be expecting

more than that!

Given my tendency to stay busy, I had been letting this simmer just below the surface of the other things that were going on, the Carroll Street meetings, the search for essential funding at [Communities In Schools](#), preparing for the Stewards' meeting, the application for Social Security and Medicare...

It felt like we need some help to learn how unknowing allows us to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. I think "waiting" – the quiet, meditative, send-your-inner-planner-to-the-beach, unstructured kind of meditation – has a real place here, but how to learn what I need to know to let my inner planner take a break, while I keep paddling.

Friday afternoon I came home from a long meeting at Carroll Street to find Marjory re-reading Elizabeth O'Connor's "Call to Commitment," the story of the early days of Church of the Saviour. She had come across a wonderful discussion of what lay at the core of mission groups as they took shape five decades ago.

As I read Chapter 6, "Marks of Love," I caught sight of a practice that seemed to fit the place where I find myself – this place where we find ourselves – this Lenten season, waiting to glimpse the unknown path to our unfolding future. It is a fresh call to shared leadership.

Learning From Experience

Forty years ago, the Church of the Saviour was in the midst of a grand experiment, nurturing mission groups. The old model of a single leader for the whole congregation had not worked. Gordon Cosby had come to understand that no one person could shepherd more than a few others, that they needed smaller structures for belonging and spiritual formation for everyone in the congregation. In those days of church growth, this was unknown territory. They all needed to wait on the Lord for guidance, AND they needed to keep working, because these new mission groups had taken on some vital tasks.

From that time of active waiting came six qualities of leadership that form part of our tradition. I offer them to each of us as a practice for this time of waiting in a time of unknowing.

1. Learn to know that the real issue is within.

When the road gets rocky, we all have a tendency to look outside to fix blame on others. It happens here as we deal with the frustrations of renovating a building. When we feel the anger rise over something going wrong in a mission group, or we get bumped from our traditional overnight date, there is a strong tendency to see where things went wrong “out there,” and call for someone else to change, to make things right. However, as many of us saw in the Non-violent Communications last month, the path to understanding often passes through the valley of the shadow of self-recognition. Even if I do not see my role in the tension, I can keep my eyes open.

When you find yourself in time of trouble, ask, “What in me is blocking the arrival of the Holy Spirit?”

2. Develop the capacity to take hostility.

Elizabeth O'Connor observed that "(I)n a Christian pilgrimage we can expect hostility. It need not take us by surprise. ... The mission group does not produce hostility in its members. We bring it with us into the group and there, for many reasons, it is uncovered. ... Any situation where there is hostility has the potential of being a step in a person's spiritual trek if that person has the capacity to receive anger without lashing back."

We got some ideas about how to deal with this in the Non-Violent Communications class led by the River of Light mission group, how to receive hostility and speak our own truth without lashing back in anger. In Stewards, we have been trying to cultivate some new patterns of listening that can help us get to the painful truth that simmers beneath that polite veneer.

Its work, but we need to develop the capacity to take hostility.

3. Learn to accept the other as s/he is.

Elizabeth reminded me that there is a bit of the manipulator in all of us. That is something uncomfortable I have been learning about myself. My strong "helper" instincts work most efficiently when there are others around who need me. Part of my own growth is to try to recognize when I am putting you in a role that I need to have filled rather than accepting you for who you are – one of God's beloved. It is not easy, because my world would work much more efficiently if everyone else thought and acted exactly according to plan – MY plan. Nevertheless, I really do not think efficiency is at the heart of God's plan. Otherwise, why would we have the marvelous

complexity of Creation – with every plant and star, every tree and cat, every snowflake and human a unique individual? God must love diversity! Moreover, part of my growth is to learn to love you as you are.

The path to growth leads through learning to accept each other as she or he is.

4. Practice sorting little issues from big ones.

As I read Elizabeth's comments about the leadership perspective that enables us to sort the little issues from the big ones, I was reminded of so many conversations about our new place on Carroll Street. She reminds us that often little issues hide something deeper, and it is a gift of leadership to be able to listen to opposing views, accept others for who they are, and still help sort the big issues from the little ones. Sometimes here it is easier to give than to receive, but practice helps.

One challenge for me here is that what looks like a BIG issue to me may not really be very important to the community or to the Universe. I know how easy it is for me to make a mountain out of the design for the backing for the tile mosaic logo that will go on the front of the building at Carroll Street. Moreover, if I am not careful – or not accepted for whom I am and helped to put my issue in perspective – I may distract us from something important with my micro-engineering worries.

Practice sorting little issues from big ones.

5. Be willing to fail ... and let others fail.

The history of Church of the Saviour is festooned with failed

initiatives. Every one of them yielded important lessons. And I do not mean that lesson that was so much a part of my early “truth.” When I started out, I was so afraid of failure that if I ever heard a critical word my automatic response was, “I’ll never do **that** again!” By that, I meant I would never do anything **like** that again. There is a big difference between those two. Fred Taylor used to say frequently, “If we keep doing what we’ve been doing, we’ll keep getting what we’ve been getting, and that’s not good enough.”

Seekers Church has always been different, stressing shared leadership that works hard at erasing the distinction between laity and clergy, a commitment to support ministry in daily life, a call to changing systems as well as helping individuals. We have offered each other so many opportunities to be involved that a new descriptive phrase has crept into our vocabulary: “All Seekers – all the time!” As we pack our tents for the move, we are looking at the opportunities for new wineskins – a partner to share our space during the week, a different time for Sunday worship, opportunities for community activities like a Mosaic Harmony concert in the fall, a separate learning time on Sunday morning... Some of them will fail, but we will have the opportunity to learn from every one. As we can be like God by accepting our failures and learning to see ourselves as imperfect and beloved – both – we begin to savor how good God really is.

Being willing to fail, and let others fail is an important part of growth.

6. Care for people ... all people.

Elizabeth reminded us that this last practice sounds deceptively simple, but is the most difficult to do: care

deeply for all people – not just those who are important to us. Our mission is to get to the point where we can say to everyone, and to every one: “I love you, and I always will.”

The challenge for me here is how easy it is for me to disengage from those I find harder to love – those whose ideas or actions I find uncomfortable, those who demand more than I want to give, and those who want to argue over things I KNOW are right. I want my world to be a safe and gentle place, so for me to practice this kind of caring is a stretch. That is part of what makes it an interesting practice at this time in my life.

Try caring for people ... all people, and see what you learn about yourself, and how God loves you.

Although these six ideas came from the experience of Church of the Saviour 50 years ago, I think they still have something to say to all of us.

For the past four or five months the Seeds of Hope mission group has been working on a fresh rendition of our [Guide for Mission Groups](#). We are getting close to closure. I hope we will be able to find some way to acknowledge these practices as part of our mission group tradition.

Conclusion

This Lenten season we are waiting in a time of unknowing. We

have said goodbye to this hallowed place, but our new home is not ready to welcome us. We are living in a time of war, when many of our core values seem to be under siege. It is a time of deep unknowing. We have gathered to acknowledge that we want to learn how unknowing allows us to pass through the valley of the shadow of death.

I offer you these six practices for this season, drawn from our own tradition, offered to help us all learn how to trust in the Lord, be strong, be brave.

1. Learn to know that the real issue is within.
2. Develop the capacity to take hostility.
3. Learn to accept the other as s/he is.
4. Practice sorting little issues from big ones.
5. Be willing to fail ... and let others fail.
6. Care for people ... all people.

Gordon first offered them as essential marks of leadership in mission groups. Since we are committed to shared leadership, I offer them to all of us. To twist an old recruiter's phrase, "Christ is looking for a few good persons!"

The Psalmist says:

*"I know I will see how good God is while I am still alive.
Trust in the Lord. Be strong. Be brave. Trust in the Lord."*

And I say, "Amen."