

“Waiting on the Lord”

By Aleen Ratzlaff

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Sue provided context for today’s lectionary passage I Kings 19:4-8 in her time for children. I wasn’t very familiar with this story of Elijah. Initially, when I first read that passage, I didn’t know who the verses were referencing. Elijah wasn’t identified by name, which in verse 4 read: “But he himself went on a journey into the wilderness and came and sat under a broom tree.”

My initial questions were who is “he” and where was he coming from?

Elijah had received a message from Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, threatening to kill him in revenge for the death of the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. So, Elijah discouraged, fled to the wilderness and rested under the shade of a broom tree.

The broom tree, which some Bible translations refer to a “juniper,” is a type of flowering desert shrub that grows to around 6 to 8 feet tall and can provide enough shade to shelter someone from the scorching desert.

There, under the broom tree and discouraged—maybe one even would say despondent—Elijah prayed that God would take his life.

But God did not answer “yes” to his prayer. In one commentary I read, “To receive a *no* answer from God can be better than receiving a *yes* answer.” And that was certainly the case for Elijah.

God graciously dealt with Elijah and allowed him time to recover before moving on to the next task. While he slept under the broom tree, an angel of the LORD appeared twice, touched him, and provided food and water, which gave him strength for his next mission.

I was reminded about the relationship between the spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of our lives. Lacking sleep and being hungry can affect us in ways. Just yesterday I was working at the college and a colleague, and I agreed to go together for lunch at the cafe. One the way, he said he was “hangry” – meaning he was easily irritated because he was hungry.

As I reviewed the lectionary scriptures for Aug. 8, I was struck by a theme of “waiting on the Lord” in Psalm 130 and that inference in Psalm 34:1-8, which was our opening responsive reading. To me, the I Kings passage also suggests Elijah “waiting on the Lord,” alone under a broom tree.

So, what does it mean to “wait upon the Lord”?

Biblical waiting is not a passive activity. It is demonstrated by active dependence on, obedience to, and focus on God. It connotes recognizing God’s control over all things and our lack of control.

In Psalm 130:5-6, the Psalmist says, “I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning.”

How do we wait on the Lord?

One hindrance can be impatience. wanting resolution now for whatever we're facing.

In my Intercultural Communication class, we focus on values that provide frameworks for understanding cultural differences.

One significant difference among cultures is values about time.

Western cultures tend to understand time as linear, with a definitive beginning and end. Time is viewed as limited in supply, so Western people structure their lives by milestones, deadlines, and the clock. Other cultures perceive time as cyclical and endless. Relationships supersede the clock.

For example, being late for an appointment, or taking a long time to get down to business, is the accepted norm in most Mediterranean and Arab countries, as well as in much of less-developed Asia. Those habits, though, are problematic in punctuality-conscious cultures such as the US, Japan, or Germany. Plus, there may be differences to what it means to being "on time" – for some it may be within one minute, while for others, up to a 15-minute leeway is still considered "on-time."

One of the videos I show in my class is "Cold Water," which is a documentary in which thirteen international students at Boston University comment about their experiences in the United States. One adjustment for a number of those interviewed has to do with time in the US.

For example, one young man from the Republic of Congo tells of his experience. He had a 4:30 appointment with his adviser. He said he was "a little late" arriving at his professor's office. There were many others waiting to meet with the prof. So, the professor had moved on to the next appointment because the young man was late. He left feeling rejected and not valued. He said, "At first I thought he didn't like me, but I learned it was my fault. You have to be there on time."

A more dramatic example of cultural differences regarding time is evidenced by the Moken people – sometimes referred to as the "Sea Gypsies." They have a semi-nomadic lifestyle based heavily on the Andaman Sea, among a group of some 800 islands that are claimed by both Myanmar and Thailand. A majority live in houseboats rather than on land. Most Moken learn to swim before they can walk.

Their language reflects the Moken culture's very different perception of time. Some words that are common in Western languages do not have any equivalent in the Moken language. For example, words like "when", "want", "worry", "goodbye", or "hello" are non-existent in the Moken language. The Moken have words for "to take" and "to give." When asked their age, their response is that they don't know. And I assume that the Moken do not have words for "impatience" or "patience" in their language either.

Our culture is one that values time – time is limited; it's not to be wasted. I think that waiting on the Lord runs contrary to our culture, and it implies having patience.

Patience, or forbearance, is listed as a fruit of the Spirit in Ephesians 5. It's the ability to stay calm while waiting for an outcome that we need or want. As a fruit of the Spirit, patience epitomizes a quiet trust and focus on God's goodness.

Three weeks ago, my brother and I began a six-week drawing class at Wichita Center for the Arts. We meet for two hours on Thursday afternoons. There are eight students in the class and their ages range from a 9-year-old to four adults who are in their 60s. The instructor has taught classes at Center for the Arts for 12 years, and during the school year he also teaches drawing and painting at Southwestern College and Butler Community College.

During our first session, we were asked to observe and then draw a three-dimensional object from a variety he had arranged, including a cube, cone, and sphere. After giving us about 20 minutes to draw, the instructor held up each of our drawings and gave all a similar critique – we were drawing what we knew about the object rather than what we were looking at.

By that, for example, I mean we were drawing what we knew the top of a square cube looks like, but we were not drawing what we were seeing. From where we sat, we couldn't see the top of the cube.

It's only when we learn to truly see what's in front of us that we can start drawing well, he said. Like the difference between listening and hearing, drawing what we see requires focus. So, our assignment was to practice observing and drawing in our sketch books.

When we returned the following week, he talked about one-point perspective -- things appear to get smaller as they get further away, converging toward a single 'vanishing point' on the horizon line. It is a way of drawing objects upon a flat, two-dimensional piece of paper so that they look three-dimensional and realistic.

Project the example on the screen:



Surfaces that face the viewer are drawn using their true shape; surfaces that travel away from the viewer converge towards a single vanishing point.

So, what does this one-point perspective analogy have to do with “waiting on the Lord”?

By focusing on God's goodness—the point on the horizon--rather than on the magnitude of the problem enables us to see things in a different perspective. When we concentrate on our problems, they will soon appear larger than what they are, and God's power will begin to look

smaller as our view of God is diminished. But when our faith keeps our eyes on the Jesus, we see that He is in control, we are safe, and God is bigger than any problem we face!

The Psalmist said that we must trust the Lord and wait patiently for Him to act. It is quite difficult to be patient when all we see are our problems. If we are going to be faithful in trusting in the Lord and waiting, then we must keep our focus on Jesus and God's Word. If we focus too much on our burdens, then it is very difficult to be patient because we want change to come instantly. And if change doesn't happen fast enough for us, our faith takes a hit because we think God isn't working.

I'd like to end this message with a congregational prayer response to several Old Testament scripture passages about waiting on the Lord. I will read the passage and together, and then let's respond with the phrase, "Give us strength and patience as we wait on you."

Lamentations 3:24-26

²⁴I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him." ²⁵The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; ²⁶it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

Give us strength and patience as we wait on you...

Isaiah 30:18

Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore, he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!

Give us strength and patience as we wait on you...

Psalms 27:13-14

¹³I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. ¹⁴Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Give us strength and patience as we wait on you...

Psalms 103:5-6

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ⁶my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

Give us strength and patience as we wait on you...

Isaiah 40:28-31

²⁸Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. ²⁹He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. ³⁰Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; ³¹but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.

Give us strength and patience as we wait on you...

Holly is going to lead us in our hymn of benediction.