

Learning to Wait Well with John the Baptist

Rich Nathan

November 23 & 24, 2019

Luke 3:1-16

I heard a news report that Amazon is spending billions and billions of dollars to get customers its products on the same day. Apparently, getting an item from Amazon on the next day is just not fast enough. I thought, “What item from Amazon would I absolutely have to have today that getting it tomorrow is simply too late?” Unless we’re talking about something like prescription medication, who is saying, “I can’t wait for a vacuum or a five gallon drum of olives or a book to be delivered to my door tomorrow. This is an emergency! I need it now!”

The pace of everything in America is accelerating faster and faster. Communication companies are spending insane amounts of money to convert our mobile connectivity speed from 4G to 5G. 4G was 500 times faster than 3G. 5G is supposed to be 100 times faster than 4G. So, we’ve increased the speed of receiving and sending information 50,000 times from 3G. How many of you get angry at Netflix because you have to stare at that stupid red screen for three seconds while your two and a half hour movie buffers in order for you to download it so you can watch it while you sit on your sofa?

I don’t know about you, but I sit there and think, “I can’t believe how long it’s taking for this movie to download. I thought we paid for ultrahigh speed on our internet. This is ridiculous.”

How many of you get upset when you’re driving behind someone who actually obeys the speed limits? Can you believe this dummy? He’s obeying the law! Come on, speed up so we can wait at the red light just up ahead.

We hate waiting as Americans. We think, “I’ve been waiting in my heated car with my seat warmers on outside of Starbucks, listening to music for two whole minutes while I’m waiting on my peppermint mocha made just for the Christmas season in its reusable red cup because I’m environmentally conscious! Two minutes? I want my peppermint mocha and I want it now!”

Research on the internet habits of Americans tell us that if a page takes longer than a second to load – one second – we Americans will click elsewhere. 40% of Americans give up on accessing a mobile shopping site that won’t load in less than three seconds. I’m sorry, I don’t have three seconds to buy something. I’ve got a life!

Today I’m starting our Advent series which traditionally is the four weeks before Christmas, but this year we’re going to extend it to five weeks to make our wait a little

longer. Advent is a season of waiting. The whole world rushes past Advent to get to Christmas. Over the next few weeks, everywhere you go you will hear music piped in even while you pump gas at a gas station. You'll hear the strains of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" or "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus".

Fleming Rutledge, the great Episcopalian preacher, said:

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"Advent teaches us to delay Christmas in order to experience it truly when it comes."

Advent teaches us that so much of life is a matter of learning to wait for something wonderful.

- As children, we wait for Christmas to come or we wait for summer vacation.
- As young adults, we wait for spring break or our SAT scores or to find out if we've been accepted to our college of choice.
- We wait to meet the love of our lives.
- We wait to get pregnant and to have the baby after nine months of pregnancy.
- We wait to hear about the job we applied for.
- We wait in traffic, we wait in airports, wait in line at the grocery store, wait for a table at a restaurant, wait in a room specifically designed for waiting – doctor's offices have waiting rooms.

One website claimed that the average person in America spends five years of their lives waiting in line. And six months of that is waiting at traffic lights.

Tom Wright, the great New Testament scholar, said in one of his commentaries that the story of the world is a story of waiting. We wait for the healing of our loved ones. We wait for the healing of our marriages. We wait for peace in our world. We wait for justice to be done. We wait for our prayers to be answered. Advent is the season in the church calendar that trains us how to wait well. Advent means coming or approach. At Advent, we wait for the birth of the Lord at Christmas, but also we wait for the return of the Lord at the end of time.

Today, we're going to begin our Advent series on waiting that we've called "What are you Waiting For?" with a message I've titled, "Learning to Wait Well with John the Baptist". Let's pray.

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God makes people wait

The God of the Bible will not be rushed. We see this truth everywhere in the Bible, God always makes people wait. Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, is 75 years old when God promises him a child. Here's what we read:

Slide Genesis 12:4,7

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

But God didn't give him a son immediately. Instead, he made Abraham wait 25 more years before he fulfilled the promise. God made the children of Israel wait 400 years in slavery before he took them to the Promised Land. The nation of Israel had to wait thousands of years before Messiah Jesus came.

We Christians are waiting for the return of Christ, for our resurrection bodies, and for the restoration of this earth. Those of us who are followers of Jesus are taught to wait until we meet another follower of Jesus before we decide to date. Followers of Jesus are taught to wait until marriage until we have sex. Followers of Jesus are taught to wait until marriage to have children.

But we hate to wait. We're not alone in that. It's not just Americans who hate to wait. Everyone around the world and everyone throughout time has hated to wait. The people in the Bible hated to wait. Here's what we read from the writer of Psalm 119. This was written 3,000 years ago.

Slide Psalm 119:84a

⁸⁴ How long must your servant wait?

The slain martyrs in the book of Revelation cry out to God. We read in

Slide Revelation 6:10

¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

The psalmist cries out over and over again, "How long?" We read this:

Slide Psalm 94:3

³ How long, LORD, will the wicked,
how long will the wicked be jubilant?

Slide Psalm 13:2

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Let me ask you a question. Is there anyone listening to me right now who says, “I love to wait”? Yet, as I said before, God will not be rushed. And one of the chief methods he uses to cause us to spiritually grow is to makes us wait. It seems like waiting causes us to grow in ways that nothing else will.

I know that not everyone listening to me right now is a follower of Jesus. You may be a church goer but you rarely pray or you’re not a church goer and you rarely pray. But for those you who do regularly pray for things, what answer to your prayers are you waiting for from God? Perhaps you’ve been praying for healing for yourself or for a loved one and the answer has been delayed. Maybe you’ve been praying for a new job or for an interview that you’ve had to open up doors for you. Maybe you’ve been praying for one of your children to make a real turn around in their life or someone that you care about to come to know Jesus the way you do. You’ve been waiting.

God often makes us wait. Why? Have you ever asked yourself that question? Why the delay? Why, God, don’t you just answer our prayers right away? Why must we wait before we see any breakthrough at all?

I think during waiting times, the Spirit of God asks questions of you and me that we can hear if we slow down and listen for the still small voice of God speaking to our hearts. There are questions we won’t hear unless we’re forced to wait. God speaks to us in waiting times and asks, “Will you continually accuse me of not loving you because I didn’t give you what you asked for in this moment? Will you continually accuse me of not caring about someone you love? Will you continually doubt that I am good or that I intend good? Will you continually accuse me of not assisting or of being deaf or far away or preoccupied when you pray? Will you always accuse me of just playing games with you, of promising but never delivering? Will you accuse me of not knowing how to run the universe or how to run your corner of the world and believe that you could do a better job than me?”

During times of waiting, I believe the fundamental question that God is asking of us over and over again is, “Will you trust me? Will you trust me with not just a couple of things – maybe your eternal salvation but nothing in this life? Will you trust me not with just a few things – maybe yourself, but not with the people you love?”

During times of waiting, God is asking you and me, “Will you trust me with everything? With people you love and people you can’t stand? Situations that are comfortable and situations that are uncomfortable? Things that you can control and things that you absolutely can’t control?” During times of waiting, God asks you and me a very simple question, “Will you trust me with everything? Will you trust me with everyone? Will you trust me with every moment – past, present and future? Every circumstance? Everything that happens and anything that might happen – will you trust me?”

Here's the question I want us to answer today. Since the story of the world is a story of waiting, and since we spend so much of our lives waiting and since it appears that God has a purpose for keeping us waiting, how do we wait well? How do we wait in line or in traffic or for a prayer to be answered or for justice or for God's intervention in someone else we love's life and wait well? How do we wait well without getting angry or upset or anxious or frustrated or unbelieving? How do we wait well?

John the Baptist is the New Testament model for us of waiting well.

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John the Baptist is a model of waiting well

John the Baptist is also the New Testament model of Advent because he was the one who got people ready for the Lord's coming.

For those of you who don't know anything about John the Baptist, he was not called the Baptist because he was a Southern Baptist preacher or he grew up in the National Baptist Conference. He was called "the Baptist" because he baptized people to get them ready for the coming of the Lord. We read at the beginning of the gospel of Mark these words,

Slide Mark 1:2-4

² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way" —
³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.' "

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

By the way, we have a baptism scheduled on December 7 and 8 for those of you who have put your faith in Jesus as your Savior and are following him as your Lord and after you decided to trust him as your Savior and follow him as your Lord you have not been water baptized. Following the service today, at all of our campuses, we're going to have a special brief baptism class. Let's make the December 7 and 8 baptism our best baptism ever! Sign up to get baptized!

Now, John was a really interesting person. First of all:

- He had a miraculous birth – his parents were past childbearing age, but God intervened and John was miraculously conceived
- He was called by Jesus the greatest human being born up to that time

Here's what we read:

Slide Matthew 11:11

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Jesus said this because John belonged to the age of the old covenant. The least person under the new covenant has greater privileges than John the Baptist ever had. You see, those of us who are followers of Jesus live under a new covenant. We have a knowledge of Jesus' death for our sins and his resurrection that defeated death. And we have the gift of the Holy Spirit permanently indwelling us. John didn't have any of these things. John had a miraculous birth. He was the greatest person under the old covenant. And

- He was incredibly courageous.

He called King Herod to account. It takes tremendous courage to stand up to a ruler of a nation because rulers hate to be called to account. They'll use whatever means is at their disposal to attack and ruin people who call them to account. John the Baptist was put to death by King Herod. It takes great courage to stand up to political power. But John was also a model of waiting well.

What lessons can we learn from the life of John the Baptist to help us when we wait to wait well?

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People who wait well, wait for God to speak and act

We live in a world of doers. Americans love people who make things happen. In America, we don't like thinkers so much. We like doers. We have a mantra in America, "you snooze, you lose." We love multitasking, goal-setting, great achievements. We don't like to wait. It's part of our national character to make things happen and in this at least at the negative edge of making things happen, I think that we Americans are following the example of King Saul in the Old Testament.

King Saul was the first king of Israel. He was told by the prophet Samuel, who was the divinely appointed representative of God to give people God's word in that day to "Wait" until Samuel came to visit him before King Saul offered sacrifices to God. But King Saul was under tremendous pressure during this waiting time. The troops were being attacked by the Philistines. Here's what we read:

Slide 1 Samuel 13:7b-12

Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. ⁸ He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. ⁹ So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering. ¹⁰ Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him.

¹¹ "What have you done?" asked Samuel.

Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Mikmash, ¹² I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."

Saul had the view that I cannot wait for the Lord to act on my behalf. If God is delaying, I must make something happen by myself. Saul had this tremendous character flaw of always taking things into his own hands when things looked like they wouldn't work out according to the promise of God. Do you know anyone like that? Do you know anyone who takes control of situations when they don't see God working? Saul is a prototype in scripture of relying on what the Bible calls the arm of the flesh. My plans. My control. My understanding. My activity. Instead of trusting in God.

I want you to compare Saul with John the Baptist. Here's what we read:

Slide John 1:32-34

³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

John the Baptist didn't try to make something happen. He didn't try to force the Messiah to be revealed before God's time, before God set his Spirit on Jesus of Nazareth. John waited for God to speak and act and point out who the Messiah was. I say this with some embarrassment as a pastor. I think that much of the church in America is much more like King Saul than like John the Baptist. Many of us church leaders are running around, trying to make something happen. Let's figure out what church going consumers want and give them that. You want music really loud? Then let's crank up the volume until your ears bleed. You want smoke machines? More comfortable chairs? A light show? A Christmas pageant with three camels? We'll do it.

Don't get me wrong, don't misunderstand what I'm saying. There's nothing wrong with loud music or comfortable chairs or a certain style of music or three camels at Christmas. What I'm driving at is that we must never confuse what people want and are demanding with the Spirit of God. You see, in the midst of all the human activity of trying to figure out as churches what do people want, we always have to step back and

ask the more important question: what does Almighty God want? What is the Spirit of God saying to us in this moment as a church?

Most of you are aware of the fact that we're going through one of the biggest transitions we've ever gone through as a church. This past year I announced that after 33 years, I'm going to turn the leadership of this church over to my successors, Eric and Julia Pickerill. I can tell you that the transition is going better than I could have ever hoped. For me and Marlene personally, we couldn't be happier. I'm personally thrilled by the decisions that Eric and Julia have made and also the contribution they are already making before they take over as Senior Pastors in January 2021.

Here's a word of encouragement for all of us, if we want Vineyard Columbus to be the kind of church it's been over the last four decades, then we need to do what we've always done in the past. That is to wait on God to speak and for God to act before we do big things.

We got the property on Cooper Road through a prophetic leading, through a miraculous set of circumstances. We decided to build our Community Center that serves thousands of people every week with a free medical clinic and dental clinic and after school program and English as a Second Language program and Value Life ministry and on and on – we decided to build that Community Center in response to an open vision from God.

The choice of Eric and Julia as my successors was a response from the clear leading from the Holy Spirit. What I'm saying today is that if Vineyard Columbus is going to have a God blessed future as a church as we've had God blessed past, we need to wait for God to speak and act and not try on our own to make something happen.

Brothers and Sisters, as individuals, if you want to live a God-blessed life, you have to wait for God to speak and act and not always try to make something happen in your own strength and by your own smarts.

Here's the second thing we learn from the life of John the Baptist about waiting well.

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People who wait well know who they are not

John the Baptist had crowds coming to him, wanting to be baptized. Here's what we read that John said to them:

Slide Luke 3:7-9

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Not exactly seeker-sensitive preaching. Marketers and advertisers would tell John that he needs a radically different message if he wants to be popular with the people. But people kept coming. Despite the negativity, the people kept coming because there’s something in us that really loves to hear the truth even when it’s hard. There’s something in us that wants a foundation for meaning and life and we don’t really want everything to always be fuzzy or comfortable all the time. Even tax collectors and soldiers were coming to John. Here’s what we read:

Slide Luke 3:12-14

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

John was so popular that people began asking the question about whether or not he was the Messiah. John, are you the Christ? Are you the one we’ve been waiting for? Here’s what we read:

Slide John 1:19-20

¹⁹ Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”

You know, John could have easily taken advantage of the crowds that he had and tried to make himself, greater than he was. Or he could have been self-deceived by people’s applause. The fact that the masses were coming after him could have turned his head and made him arrogant, or gave him an inflated sense of self-importance. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for John to nod his head when people ask if he was the Messiah.

But John was a man who knew how to wait well. People who know how to wait well know who they are not. I am not the Christ, he said. I’m not the Messiah. How many of us would do well to memorize this little phrase, “I am not the Christ!” and repeat it to ourselves over and over again? I am not the Christ. I am not the Christ. How many of us try to go through life as the Messiah, trying to rescue our kids from the consequences of their own bad choices even when our kids are well into adulthood. I am not the

Christ. Jesus has to rescue my children. How many of us are trying to save our spouses? If we could just get them to come to this particular service or read that particular book, if we were just a little more patient or a little kinder, a little more forgiving, then they would come to know Jesus the way we do. Are you trying to save someone? Say to yourself, I am not the Christ. Jesus is the one who saves.

How many of us are in the business of trying to get the whole world fixed? We're always trying to straighten something out or bring justice into a situation. This is just wrong and I'm going to work justice to straighten it all out. Wait a minute! I am not the Christ!

I wonder how much of our inability to wait well for God to fix and heal and rescue and save is simply due to confusing ourselves with Jesus. If I just pushed harder, if I just nagged more, if I just argued more fervently, if I just got together one more time then this person or this situation would be fixed.

People who wait well know who they are not and finally

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People who wait well know who they are

Here's what we read:

Slide John 3:27-30

²⁷To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.

²⁸You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.'

²⁹The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰He must become greater; I must become less."

John knew who he was. He wasn't the Christ. The classic definition of a narcissist is someone who wants to be the bride of every wedding. I want to be the star. I want the focus to be on me. John said, I'm not the bride. I'm not the bridegroom. But John also knew who he was. I'm here to make Jesus great! I'm the best man or the maid of honor. I'm just a groomsman or a bridesmaid. I'm here to serve the groom, Jesus.

Here's a closing thought. I wonder if you and I simply adopted the attitude that we're just here to serve the Lord, to make sure the attention was focused on him, if waiting wouldn't be much easier. Waiting in traffic – well, Lord, if this is the way you want me to spend these minutes, I'm just here for you. Help me to use this time to not be angry, but to thank you for the good things in my life because I didn't thank you this morning.

I'm waiting in the slowest line in the grocery store. Lord, I'm just here for you. If you want me here in order to have a conversation with someone who is also waiting in line, if you want me to pray for the person in front of me or to notice something about this environment, let me do that! I'm here for you, Lord, as I wait for this plane or this doctor to get done with her last appointment.

People who wait well know who they are. We followers of Jesus exist in every situation to serve the purposes of Jesus and to make Jesus look good. He must increase and we must decrease! We are to be loose change in the Lord's pocket that he can spend any way he chooses. If Jesus wants to waste our time or keep us cooling our heels, he is free to do that because we know who we are. We're here to serve the purposes of the Lord.

Let's pray.

Learning to Wait Well with John the Baptist

Rich Nathan
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Luke 3:1-16

1. God makes people wait
2. John the Baptist is a model of waiting well
 - a. People who wait well, wait for God to speak and act
 - b. People who wait well know who they are not
 - c. People who wait well know who they are