

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE GIFT OF GOD’S TIMING”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 1: 26-38

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 21, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 1: 26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 35 The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

The Gift of God’s Timing

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Throughout the season of Advent, we have been asked to do something that feels somewhat unnatural—again and again, and not subtly or occasionally, but persistently: we have been asked to wait. To wait, in our case, for Christmas, to wait for Jesus to be born, to wait for the light of the world to break into the darkness.

But waiting is not easy to do, is it? Consider how so much of our life is built around not having to wait. I texted Dr. Sutton last week when he was in London, and the message was delivered instantly, which is what we have come to expect with our technology. But it goes beyond technology. We have fast-food restaurants; we watch movies on demand; we can place an Amazon order in the morning, and, in some cases—by some modern-day miracle—it arrives later that same day.

We tend to notice immediately when things take longer than they should. This past Thursday, like many of you, I found myself stuck in traffic because of an incident on the Don Holt Bridge, and what should have been a five- to ten-minute drive stretched into a forty-five-minute crawl. And then something “interesting”

happened. A man in the car next to me motioned for me to roll down my window. When I did, he said, "Isn't it nice to be stuck in traffic? We don't slow down nearly enough these days. I really needed this."

Of course, I'm teasing. If there had been a hot mic in any of the cars around me, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have heard anything resembling gratitude—probably more frustration, not to mention a few choice words. Our frustration with waiting reveals not only something obvious about our impatience, but also something perhaps less obvious: one of the most fundamental flaws of our human condition, namely, our insatiable appetite for control.

Oh, for all our planning, shopping, and gift giving, we can never really control Christmas. What I mean is, we can't control the timing of God's good pleasure any more than we could control that very fullness of time in which our Savior came. Even today, we have to wait a little longer, and whether we realize it or not, that may actually be a good thing, because waiting is part of the soil in which faith grows.

I doubt there's anyone here this morning who isn't waiting on something. Some are waiting for clarity about the future; maybe it's a decision that feels weighty and unresolved. Some are waiting for reconciliation, hoping that a strained or broken relationship can be restored. Still, others here this morning are waiting for healing—physical healing, emotional healing, spiritual healing. Like the Psalmist, we too have been known to cry out, "How long, O Lord?"

If we have lived at all, then we know that waiting is part of what it means to be human. Luke understands this, which is partly why his telling of the Christmas story begins not with angels and shepherds, but with a season of waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth certainly know what it means to wait, and Luke is sure to communicate to us that they are a righteous couple. Luke doesn't want us to mistakenly presume that they have done something wrong. On the contrary, Zechariah and Elizabeth are faithful, devout, and obedient to God's commandments.

Yet, despite their faithfulness, Zechariah and Elizabeth have lived with a deep and enduring disappointment—they have no child. And for years and years, they waited. Perhaps for decades they prayed prayers which, for all they knew, had simply gone unanswered. For whatever length of time it was, Zechariah and Elizabeth had to live with a kind of quiet and nagging heartache—a longing, a waiting. Add to the mix the societal stigma that accompanied barrenness in their day, and I suspect that hope itself had become exhausting. That's what often happens when weariness sets in and the waiting feels too long.

When the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the temple and announces that Elizabeth will bear a son, Zechariah responds not with joy, but with skepticism. He asks, in essence, "How can I be sure?" His age and basic biology give Zechariah more than enough reason to doubt, and who can blame him? His hope had been deferred for so long that he was suspicious. For his stubbornness of heart, for his lack of faith, Zechariah was struck silent.

Now, we often interpret this moment as a punishment, but what if we viewed it more as an opportunity? Consider that for a full nine months, Zechariah could not speak. He couldn't explain, he couldn't question, he couldn't shape the narrative. All he could do was wait—and in his waiting, Zechariah saw God working in ways he could never have imagined.

Elizabeth also waited, but her waiting was different. As the child grew in her womb, she knew it; she could feel it. When the child was finally born, the community gathered to celebrate, and when the time came to name the child, tradition took over. Surely, he would be named after his father. Surely, the future would mirror the past. But Elizabeth says otherwise: "No. He is to be called John."

The name John was unexpected; it was not traditional; it was a break from the anticipated script. The people turned to Zechariah, who confirmed it in writing: "His name is John." At that moment, his voice returned, and the first words he speaks are very different from the last words he had uttered. He doesn't express doubt, offer an explanation, or even an apology—he offers praise: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."

It seems that waiting has changed Zechariah, which is one of the great lessons that the season of Advent has to teach: that waiting—when entrusted to God—has the power to transform us. Waiting can reorient our priorities, humble our assumptions, and remind us, as it did for Zechariah, that redemption is not something we manufacture—it is something that God accomplishes.

Isaiah spoke about this same truth from a different moment in the history of God's people. Isaiah 40's earliest audience knew well what it meant to wait, and they had grown tired of it. Jerusalem had fallen. The temple had been destroyed. The people had been taken into exile. Everything that had anchored their identity had been stripped away. They were living in a foreign land under foreign rule, and I suspect that many of them were wondering whether their waiting for God would ever amount to anything.

Into that weariness came that astonishing and hopeful word from Isaiah that Linda and Rob read for us earlier: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God. He does not faint or grow weary." In other words, even when we are exhausted, God is not, and when we are completely spent, God's hand remains steady. On those occasions when we feel all but forgotten, Isaiah would have us know that God has not forgotten us. To further assure us of God's divine promises to always love us and to never leave or forsake us, Isaiah puts it like this: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength."

Now, we should notice what Isaiah didn't say. He didn't say that those who wait upon the Lord will avoid hardship. He didn't say that waiting would be easy or quick. He didn't promise that our circumstances will immediately improve. But what he did promise was God's renewal—a strength not of our own making, an endurance that transcends our stamina. And lest we think that waiting is a passive thing, Isaiah reminds us that those who wait upon the Lord "shall mount up with wings like eagles; they run and not be weary, they walk and not faint." Biblical waiting is never idle; it is always faithful.

Waiting is about remaining present. It is about hoping against despair when the answers we seek are slow to come. The more our lives look like that, the more we become active participants in the mission of God, living witnesses to the reality that God's providential hand is still very much at work in the world. Recognizing that the future is ultimately shaped more by God than by us is sometimes hard to grasp. Having to wait on what we think is best is hard, to say the least. And for those who like to be involved, engaged, and proactive, this is especially difficult to understand—but it is nonetheless true. Neither God nor His good purposes are summoned by our urgency. God is not compelled by our timelines.

And this is one of the blessings of Advent: that we would come to know that salvation comes, but not because we demand it. It comes because God gives it. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the way God chose to enter the world. He came not in power, not in spectacle, not on clouds of glory. No! God came in vulnerability—one might even say obscurity. He came in the slow and natural unfolding of human life.

And so it happened that Mary waited. Elizabeth waited. Zechariah waited. Israel waited. I feel like Oprah Winfrey—everybody waited. And then, in the fullness of time, God, in Jesus Christ, our Lord, became flesh. Advent reminds us that there is a quiet mercy that comes in waiting, even when it feels uncomfortable, because waiting creates space—not only for us to patiently listen, but also for God to do what only God can

do. Waiting also teaches us to distinguish between what we want and what God wants, and it reminds us that life is not centered on our schedules or preferences, but rather on God's redemptive purposes.

As we fast approach Christmas, it may be tempting to rush headlong to the manger and skip over these final days of Advent, but the church has given us this season for a reason. It invites us to wait just a bit longer—not because Christmas is uncertain, but precisely because waiting has something to teach us. And yes, those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, but not because waiting earns God's favor. Waiting allows us to receive it. Whatever we find ourselves waiting for at this moment, we can be assured that God is not absent in our waiting. God is always at work, even when we cannot yet see the outcome. Advent reminds us that God's timing is always fuller, deeper, and more faithful than our timing.

God's timing is a gift to receive, and it is oftentimes a gift for which we must wait. In these final days of Advent, know this: waiting never has the last word. By God's grace, silence always gives way to song, and darkness is always pierced by the light. In just a few days, on Christmas Eve, we will gather again and look upon a manger—not because we have earned our way there, and certainly not because we have been perfect in our waiting. We will look to the manger because God, in love and in the fullness of time, chose to reveal Himself to us in that way.

We know and trust that the God who has been faithful in the past will be faithful in the future. And so, with hearts made ready by patience, humility, and hope, we wait—and our waiting is not in vain.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.