

“Waiting”¹: (An Affirmation of Its Value)
A Sermon by John Vannorsdall

Editorial Note:

When John Vannorsdall died this past Palm Sunday at age 95 of COVID-related complications, a singular preaching voice was stilled. After serving as pastor of Lutheran congregations in New York and Connecticut, John entered campus ministry, holding positions as the Lutheran Campus Pastor at Cornell, the chaplain at Gettysburg College, and the University Chaplain at Yale. From Yale, he went to the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, where he was president until his retirement in 1990. His accomplishments were many, but he was best known, perhaps, to many of us as a featured preacher in the Lutheran Series of “The Protestant Hour” (now “Day1”) radio program in the 1970s and 1980s.

John’s sermons embodied at least two of the shifts occurring in American preaching at that time. First, instead of the commanding, sometimes stentorian, tones of the 1950s “pulpit princes,” John’s voice was soft-spoken, invitational, conversational, and poetic. His sermons were gentle come-let-us-reason together dialogues. They felt much more like whispered secrets and personal experiences shared between friends than exhortations. Second, instead of dogmatic convictions proclaimed and amply illustrated, John’s sermons moved from life to theology, from everyday experiences—working a vegetable garden with his beloved Gravely tractor, a conversation overhead in a bank lobby, the emptiness of a gold watch given at a retirement banquet—to gospel insights.

The following sermon, “Waiting,” is one that John preached on “The Protestant Hour.” Not only is the theme of waiting for God an apt one for the Advent season, made doubly pertinent by the anxious, sometimes-painful waiting woven into the social experience of pandemic, but the sermon is an example of a much-needed genre of preaching today: preaching designed to re-enchant hearers in a time of widespread disenchantment. The overall goal of the sermon is to invite the listener deep into the heart of Psalm 130 and into the mystery of waiting for the Lord. But how to do that in a flat, technological age when awe and wonder are in short supply and holy mysteries are often reduced to practical puzzles?

The craft of this sermon is breathtaking. John begins with ordinary waiting—for the coffee water to boil, for a taxi, for the first day of school. Is waiting for the Lord like this? Yes, and no. It is like this in anticipation and sometimes excitement, but not so ordinary as waiting for those quotidian things. It is more than ordinary waiting.

So, then, like taking a step up on a staircase, or raising the key of a tune, John moves up a register and describes a higher and more complex form of waiting, waiting for a lover, “the one for whom we waited with such longing, such expectation.” Is waiting for the Lord like this? Again, yes...and no. It is like waiting for a lover, but not that private or exclusive.

So again he rachets up a step, and then another and another, each one into new forms of waiting, each elevation moving closer to the elusive mystery of waiting for the Lord. Finally, when he has climbed as high as human experience can go, reached the utmost rung on analogy’s ladder, he knows that he has still not arrived at the destination. So, he leaps upward and begins to sing a poetic hymn of the glory of the

Lord for whom we wait. The sermon does not so much end as it beckons us to join the choir and to raise our own voices in hope.

Thomas G. Long

The Sermon

From Psalm 130 these familiar words: “I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in His word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning; I say, more than they that watch for the morning.”

Most of our waiting, I suppose, is just ordinary, and doesn't mean very much. I put the coffee water on the stove in the morning and wait for it to boil, but not really, because I drink my juice, let the cats come in or out, pour the cereal in a bowl, and by then the water's ready, and I haven't thought much of anything at all. Waiting for a taxi is something different because I hate to call until I'm ready in case they come right away, which they never do, so waiting is hard, and I pace back and forth afraid that I will miss my train. But what does it mean to wait for the Lord?

When I was young, in junior high, we always got new pants for school a week or so before it started. Always corduroy in a shade of brown, and sometimes a sweater to match. They had that new smell, hanging there in the closet, and at least once, when no one was around, I'd try them on and imagine what it would be like to walk down the hall with my summer tan and summer muscles, and much taller than when school let out the spring before. At least half an inch. New corduroys have a certain stiffness and make a special sound, and I imagined that my friends would say, “John is older now.” How I looked forward to that first day of school in my new corduroys! It was hard to wait. But what does it mean to wait for the Lord?

Somehow, it's not like ordinary waiting. Not like waiting for the water to boil or the first day of school. It's not like waiting for the prayer to end, the hymn to begin, the telephone to ring. Not like waiting for day's end when we can turn back the covers and turn out the light.

It's more like waiting for a certain woman, a certain man. We'd seen this other before, walking, talking with friends, so self-assured and yet with something saved, held back, some inner life reserved for another time. But it seemed as though this one who stood out among all the others was well beyond our possibility, as though they belonged in another class, with another group of people each possessing more attractive ways than ours, some quality which put us in their shadow where we were not easily seen. And then one day she came, he came, to talk with us, or maybe only smiled, but something inside of us knew that we had been acknowledged, invited to share a private word or longing which would be ours alone, something between the two of us. And with great care, with the rhythm and grace of a ballet, we drew near and moved away. We ate together, prepared a meal together, were silent together, and shared our stories of times gone by, our good times, and the things which made us afraid. And soon our world revolved around this other. We knew the other's walk and each movement of the face and tone of voice, and our lives were somehow recreated in this person. This was the one for whom we waited with such longing, such expectation. And our waiting for the Lord is more like waiting for a man or a woman than like waiting for the water to boil or for the first day of school. It's like waiting for a man or a woman; but waiting for the Lord is not that private or that exclusive.

“My soul waiteth for the lord more than they that watch for the morning.” I wait

for something large enough to re-shape the whole of my life. Something large enough to gather me up, and all those around me, to turn us in a common direction and make us friends. I wait for all the lights to go out, for the whole city to lose its power, for a time when I am drawn into the hallway with my candle and my neighbors with theirs, where in the soft light they say to me, "I wonder what happened? The whole city is out!" And I say, "I wonder how long it will be?" And together we go in search of the elevator to see if anyone is stuck in it and needing help, and when we come back I say, "I was just about to have some soup. Won't you come and join me while it is still hot?" And they come, which had never happened before the lights went out, that I and my neighbors were together sharing food and conversation. It's not like ordinary waiting, this waiting for the Lord. It's like waiting for an act of God which transforms the ordinary, which creates the possibility of something new. An act of God which unleashes the laws which bind and brings forth both a carnival of looting, but also neighbors sitting down for soup and gladness that something happened large enough to be a bridge twelve feet long from door to door.

Waiting for the Lord is like waiting for some astonishing news to greet us in the morning. That a snowstorm has closed all the offices, schools, and stores. And we come alive with new possibilities of things to be done with that day. We shovel to our neighbor's door in hope that there'll be some need of us and that the neighbors will be glad we came. It's like waiting for a snowstorm which transforms an ordinary day into a day that's really different. It's like waiting for a war, this waiting for the Lord. Perverse, but true enough for those of us able to recapture some of the feelings of World War II and how that also gathered us and shook the gloom of the depression, and changed the tune, and called us to be concerned for one another's sons and daughters, and how we talked to people we'd never met, with deep compassion sometimes. It was a time when we did extraordinary things, took bizarre trips, and told incredible stories. And suffered incredibly, too. And it was the worst and the best of times. Like waiting for that kind of wartime, when lives are changed, and whole societies, and nothing is ever much the same again, at least for a time. Like waiting for that kind of wartime, we wait for the Lord.

In some ways waiting for Christmas is like waiting for the Lord. It has some of the elements of all the other waiting. It's like waiting for the water to boil, because we've been through Christmas before, and doing other things while we wait. It's like waiting to wear the new corduroys on the first day of school, to start fresh; like waiting to make this the best of all Christmases.

And Christmas has all the power of a blackout, snowstorm, or war. To set up a tree in the house, to bake special cookies, take time from work, to set aside money, to gather in whomever we can of friends and family, to surround ourselves with special music of great power—these things together create an overwhelming change in what is ordinary in our lives. It is a magic time, a time for love, for reaching out to neighbors. A magic time in which old wounds can be healed, forgiveness can be offered and accepted. Christmas is a private time, and a time for lovers, but it is larger than one person or even two. Christmas embraces our whole world, the largest of our hopes and dreams, not just for ourselves, but for all people. In fact, we know that it would not be Christmas for one or for lovers if it did not evoke some larger setting in which all of us became, for a brief but glorious time, a part of the extended family of God. To wait for Christmas is something of what it means to wait for the Lord.

All of the elements are known to us, I think, all that it means to wait for the Lord. And yet it is the Lord for whom my soul waits, and not the first day of school, the lover, or Christmas. They are like rain running down the window screen filling each tiny square of my life with water, but the drop moves on, and behind it the squares wink and the water is gone. The lights of the city will come on again, and I must blow out my candle and my neighbor his as he crosses the black-out bridge from his door to mine, and I must go back to yesterday's living. The second day of school is not like the first. The corduroys, the tan, and the muscles have been seen, and I must now face algebra and the good but demanding Miss Sipe.

And what shall we say of the man or the woman who reordered our lives? It may be that they are already gone, and our lives changed again, this time by grief or sadness. Or, if still living with this other in warm pleasure, we discover that this relationship, which at its start was so dramatic and longed for, is now simply the center of the web of ordinary things and a constant reminder that what is central for a time is always subject to death, and our life with another is no hedge against darkness.

Christmas itself is so timebound that even as the day begins, we are aware of its ending, and that short days from now we'll be back at work; the lights will come down, and we must yet face the coldest days of winter.

It is for the Lord of Christmas that my soul waits, and Advent is our preparation for His coming. I wait for the Lord who was before I began to be, who knows the world from its beginning and is not afraid of its great size and empty places. The Lord who for whatever reason, I cannot guess, will not stay away as though embarrassed by a peopled sphere which went always wrong from its beginning, but who draws near to wait with those who wait for Him. I wait for the Lord who is angry and filled with indignation when people draw swords against one another, cheat one another, and spit oil upon the white sand beaches. I wait for the Lord who in a great parabola of Grace enters the atmosphere of time and space, is bound to a Cross by the weight of human sin, and who swoops on down into the Hell of all time's making, and, arching up again through Easter's tomb, brings with Him all who wait for Him and desire to live in the light and to sing the songs of freedom.

I wait for the Lord who doesn't boil and cool again, like the coffee water. I wait for the Lord whose love is lasting, who stirs me for longer than a one night's blackout, a snowstorm which re-orders just a single day. I wait for the Lord who challenges me to find in the love of another human both a model and strength for giving my life to a world of always particular people who live in shadows waiting for our recognition. I wait for the Lord whose Christmas lights are always burning, who sends each night a band of angels singing, each day a pillar of cloud and each night a fire to lead us out of every time of bondage. I wait for his promised time when we shall beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation. "I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in His word do I hope." "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Note

1 This sermon is found in *The Best of John Vannorsdall* (Chicago: The Commission for Communication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1990), 46-50. It is reprinted by the generous permission of the Vannorsdall family.