

A group of psychologists wanted to study the concept of delayed gratification. So they gathered some people known for their ability to wait for what they want: four year olds. One at a time, the four-year-olds were taken to a room and seated at a table that had a big, fat marshmallow on it. The examiner said she had to run and get something. The child was given a choice: they could eat that one marshmallow right away, or, they could wait until she got back, and eat two marshmallows. Now some kids came up with all sorts of inventive ways to pass the time: sing songs, count their fingers, stare at the marshmallow. One kid in the study even licked the table, I suppose, in case it had started to taste like marshmallow. But a whole bunch of kids just grabbed the marshmallow and ate it right away. They just couldn't wait.

The researchers tracked these children through to adulthood. They found that those who were able to wait as four-year-olds grew up to be more socially competent, better able to cope with stress, and less likely to give up under pressure. Those who couldn't wait grew up to be more stubborn and indecisive, more easily upset by frustration, and more resentful about not getting enough.

So ... anybody want a marshmallow?

We all wait for things in life. Lots of those things are relatively small – waiting for a tax refund to come, for a traffic light to change, to be called into the doctor's office. But we wait for big things, too. An infertile couple waits in hope of someday having a child. A single person waits to find a life companion. A worried mother waits for her teenager to come home. A man whose job brings him no joy waits for retirement. A widow waits to feel comfortable living life alone. A terminally ill person waits to die.

Most of us don't like waiting. Waiting means things are out of our control. We can't hurry them along. We're subject to someone else's schedule, someone else's plan. Waiting tries our patience and taxes our sense of humor.

A few weeks ago Pastor Vern said that the most frequently repeated command in the Bible is "fear not." We shouldn't be afraid because the Lord is our savior and protector. We shouldn't be afraid because we can count on God to have our back. I like this kind of God. The God who tells me to "fear not" is a confident God, a dependable God, a God who has everything under control. I want to trust in this God because he's on my side and he'll be there for me, right away.

But the same God who says "fear not" also says a whole lot of "wait." The command to "wait on the Lord" shows up 43 times in the Old Testament. There are plenty of stories about waiting, too: God promises Abraham as many descendants as the stars in the sky – but 24 years pass before he gets even one. *Wait.* God tells the Israelites that he will rescue them from slavery in Egypt, but it's four centuries before Moses arrives. And even then they have to spend 40 more years wandering through the wilderness before they can enter the promised land. *Wait.* The disciples were ready for Jesus to usher in the kingdom right now, but he says, not yet. In the story we've been following this Lent, the disciples' boat has been battered by the wind all night ... but Jesus doesn't arrive until the 'fourth watch,' sometime between 3-6 in the morning. *Wait.* Even the last words of the book of Revelation are, "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.'" *Wait.*

Why does God make us wait? If God can do anything, why doesn't he bring us help and relief and answers right now? One reason John Ortberg suggests is that what God does in us while we wait is as important as what it is we are waiting for.

The ability to wait well, you see, is a test of maturity. Those marshmallow-grabbers from the study were unable to control their impulse to be satisfied right away. Even later in life, they tended to make rash decisions and struggled more with addiction. In contrast, those who were able to delay gratification showed higher emotional intelligence and reported greater satisfaction with their lives. Perhaps, then, as we wait God is working in us to make us more spiritually mature – stronger, wiser, deeper in faith. Waiting is not just something we have to do to get what we want. It is part of the process of becoming who God wants us to be.

One key thing to becoming spiritually mature is to consider your times of waiting as waiting on the Lord. That's different than waiting for the Lord, when you're expecting God to fix your problems, preferably right now. Waiting on the Lord means deciding to say, every day if need be, "God, I trust you, I need you, and I will obey you." It means letting go of your desire to control what happens in your life. Waiting on the Lord means giving God the benefit of the doubt that he'll be there even when you're not sure what to do next. I've mentioned before that my favorite Bible verse is in Romans 5: "For we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope will not disappoint us." That kind of thinking sounds like spiritual maturity. You can hold out for two marshmallows. God will help.

I believe the single most important thing you can do to help you wait is pray. Be in constant conversation with God, asking him to walk with you every step of the way. Prayer allows you to wait with a little less worry. Prayer lets you turn your impatience and frustration and anxiety and fear over to God. It lets God fill you with quietness and assurance and confidence that God is in control, and that you are in God's hands. And

then, as Isaiah writes, whether you are soaring like eagles, or just focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, you will be growing closer to God.

This Lent, we've been talking about getting out of the boat, taking a small step forward in faith, facing our fears, and keeping our eyes on Jesus. But I want you to remember that sometimes in life, even when we're trying our best to walk on water, we have to wait. We have to wait for the right time or the right opportunity; we have to wait for courage; we have to wait for results. When you wait, remember that God is still with you. He wants you to walk and not faint. He will help you run and not grow weary. He just might even raise you up on wings like eagles, and make you soar. Amen.