



"Waiting For God"
by Henri Nouwen

From *Finding My Way Home*

Waiting is not a very popular attitude. Waiting is not something that people think about with great sympathy. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps this is because the culture in which we live is basically saying, "Get going! Do something! Show you are able to make a difference! Don't just sit there and wait!" For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something.

In our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. One of the most pervasive emotions in the atmosphere around us is fear. People are afraid – afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, and also afraid of the future. Fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are. But if we cannot flee, we may fight instead. Many of our destructive acts come from the fear that something harmful will be done to us. And if we take a broader perspective – that not only individuals but whole communities and nations might be afraid of being harmed – we can understand how hard it is to wait and how tempting it is to act. Here are the roots of a "first strike" approach to others. People who live in a world of fear are more likely to make aggressive, hostile, destructive responses than people who are not so frightened. The more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes. That is why waiting is such an unpopular attitude for many people.

It impresses me, therefore, that all the figures who appear on the first pages of Luke's gospel are waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting. Mary is waiting. Simeon and Anna, who were there at the temple when Jesus was brought in, are waiting. The whole opening scene of the good news is filled with waiting people. And right at the beginning all those people in some way or another hear the words, "Do not be afraid. I have something good to say to you." These words set the tone and the context. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon, and Anna are waiting for something new and good to happen to them.

Who are these figures? They are representatives of the waiting Israel. The psalms are full of this attitude: "My soul is waiting for the Lord. I count on his word. My soul is longing for the Lord more than a watchman for daybreak. (Let the watchman count on daybreak and Israel on the Lord.) Because with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption," (*Psalms 130:5-7*). "My soul is waiting for the Lord" – that is the song that reverberates all through the Hebrew scriptures.

But now all who dwell in Israel are waiting. In fact we might say that the prophets criticized the people (at least in part) for giving up their attentiveness to what was coming. Waiting finally became the attitude of the remnant of Israel, of that small group of Israelites that remained faithful. The prophet Zephaniah says, "In your midst I will leave a humble and lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will seek refuge in the name of Yahweh. They will do no wrong, will tell no lies; and the perjured tongue will no longer be found in their mouths," (*Zephaniah 3:12-13*). It is the purified remnant of faithful people who are waiting. Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Simeon are representatives of that remnant. They have been able to wait, to be attentive, to live expectantly.

But what is the nature of waiting? What is the practice of waiting? How are they waiting, and how are we called to wait with them?

Waiting, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. "Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son." "Mary, listen! You are to conceive and bear a son," (*Luke 1:13, 31*). People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. This is very important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Zechariah, Mary, and Elizabeth were living with a promise that nurtured them, that fed them, and that made them able to stay where they were. And in this way, the promise itself could grow in them and for them.

Second, waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late? You cannot do anything about it, so you have to sit there and just wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, "Just wait." Words like that seem to push us into passivity.

But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. That's the secret. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is *the* moment.

A waiting person is a patient person. The word *patience* means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait

there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, "Don't be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention."

But there is more. Waiting is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: "I wish that I would have a job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go." We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. That is why we have such a hard time waiting: we want to do the things that will make the desired events take place. Here we can see how wishes tend to be connected with fears.

But Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were not filled with wishes. They were filled with hope. Hope is something very different. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. Therefore, hope is always open-ended.

I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something really new, something beyond my own expectations could happen to me. Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me," (*Luke 1:38*). She was saying, "I don't know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen." She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. And she did not want to control them. She believed that when she listened carefully, she could trust what was going to happen.

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God's love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

Now let me say something about the practice of waiting. How do we wait? One of the most beautiful passages of scripture is *Luke 1:39-56*, which suggests that we wait together, as did Mary and Elizabeth. What happened when Mary received the words of promise? She went to Elizabeth. Something was happening to Elizabeth as well as to Mary. But how could they live that out?

I find the meeting of these two women very moving, because Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. Mary's visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth's waiting. And then Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled." And Mary responded, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the

Lord," (Luke 1:45-46). She burst into joy herself. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.

I think that is the model of the Christian community. It is a community of support, celebration, and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us. The visit of Elizabeth and Mary is one of the Bible's most beautiful expressions of what it means to form community, to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening.

This is what prayer is all about. It is coming together around the promise. This is what celebration is all about. It is lifting up what is already there. This is what Eucharist is all about. It is saying, "Thank you," for the seed that has been planted. It is saying, "We are waiting for the Lord, who has already come."

The whole meaning of the Christian community lies in offering a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and darkness. That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim that God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of marriage, friendship, community, and the Christian life.

Our waiting is always shaped by alertness to the word. It is waiting in the knowledge that someone wants to address us. The question is, are we home? Are we at our address, ready to respond to the doorbell? We need to wait together to keep each other at home spiritually, so that when the word comes it can become flesh in us. That is why the book of God is always in the midst of those who gather. We read the word so that the word can become flesh and have a whole new life in us.

Simone Weil, a Jewish writer, said, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." When Jesus speaks about the end of time, he speaks precisely about the importance of waiting. He says that nations will fight against nations and there will be wars and earthquakes and misery. People will be in agony, and they will say, "The Christ is there! No, he is here!" Everybody will be totally upset, and many will be deceived. But Jesus says you must stand ready, stay awake, stay tuned to the word of God, so that you will survive all that is going to happen and be able to stand confidently (*con-fide*, with trust) in the presence of God together in community (see *Matthew 24*). That is the attitude of waiting that allows us to be people who can live in a very chaotic world and survive spiritually.