

Waiting for the Lord
Psalm 130

“Utter boredom for many months, interspersed with moments of acute terror.” That’s the way World War I was described a century ago, and military men have echoed that description of warfare ever since. After all, a soldier on guard duty or a sailor standing watch is all too aware that some sort of danger may be out there, somewhere. Sure, nothing may have happened last night, or the night before, or the night before that. But the hours of boredom in the past are no guarantee that a sneak attack won’t come sometime tonight. After all, General Washington launched his attack on Trenton, New Jersey, just at daybreak on December 26, 1777. And he won a smashing victory, for after a little too much Christmas merry-making, the Hessian soldiers had simply let their guard down.

Yes, a night watchman must remain alert – any rustling of the leaves may be an enemy soldier approaching. Or it may just be a possum wandering around. And let’s face it, overreacting can be just as dangerous as ignoring a true cause for alarm. One of the best examples of this took place exactly 157 years ago, on the night of May 2 in 1863. For it was shots in the dark from Confederate soldiers that felled General Stonewall Jackson. How different might the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg, and thus the rest of the Civil War have been had those sentries been a bit more careful?

Oh yes, we can see that a mistake by a night watchman can have long-lasting effects. It’s the right combination of alertness and good judgment that’s called for – but who can achieve such a proper perspective in the dark? No, it’s no wonder that watchmen long for the morning sun, for the light which can help them more accurately distinguish the hostile from the harmless.

And we’ve all been getting a taste of the night watchman’s world lately, haven’t we? For in one way or another, his combination of dread and boredom has come to all of us. It has been hard for sociable folks like us to stay cooped up, especially when we feel fine. And so, we long to be able to take off our masks and gloves, to reopen our businesses and get back to work, to give hugs and handshakes to our family and friends, to come back to public worship. We’d like to let our guard down.

But at the same time, there are 27 confirmed cases of the virus in Claiborne County and 78 in Warren County. These numbers are rising, and we’re told that the danger is greatest to those over 65 who have underlying health conditions – and a lot of us fall into that category. In other words, the enemy is still out there, so in spite of our boredom we must remain vigilant.

Moreover, we’re told that people can have the virus without displaying any outward symptoms. And so, because we can’t test everyone regularly enough to sort out who has the virus and who doesn’t, while we are all still very much in the dark about this invisible threat, we can’t let our guard down. And so we wait, as watchmen wait for the morning, longing for the clarity and truth and perspective that only light can bring.

But what exactly are we waiting for? Are we waiting for the state and county governments to loosen their restrictions? But once they do that, once they say we can go out shopping and gather in groups of more than ten, would it be safe for many of us to do so? Would we be willing to put ourselves or our loved ones at risk?

Or perhaps we're waiting for more tests and quicker tests to be made available. But how often would someone need to be tested? For let's face it – right after you leave the doctor's office with a clean bill of health, you could bump into a sick person, and you would have no way to know you had been infected. And I'm told that the quicker the test results come back, the less reliable they tend to be. Is a test that only detects the virus 85% of the time really that useful?

Or perhaps we're longing for a vaccine. But just a few days ago, Dr. Fauci reminded us that the very earliest it could be available in sufficient doses to make a real difference would be in January – and that's if everything goes according to plan. No, we remain in the dark, and it looks like that's where we'll be for awhile – waiting, watching and waiting.

But instead of waiting for doctors and researchers to make discoveries, instead of waiting for governors and mayors, supervisors and aldermen to make decisions, the psalmist points us in a surer direction, a higher direction. For in verses 5 and 6, he says that he is waiting for the Lord. And while he waits, verses 1 and 2 remind us that he keeps crying out to God, asking God to hear his prayers.

And to be fair, we're doing that too. Our President called for a national day of prayer on March 15 – the last Lord's Day we were able to worship in person. Since that time, our denomination, along with many others, called for and observed another day of Prayer on April 10. And our annual National Day of Prayer is coming up this Thursday, May 7. In addition to the national broadcast, which will be on Facebook Live from 7-9pm, we'll have our own prayer service livestreamed here at 10am.

But while we pray for wisdom and courage for our leaders during this difficult time, while we pray for creativity and skill for our scientists and researchers to develop treatments and cures, while we pray for God to protect our doctors, nurses, and first responders from this virus, while we ask God to keep us and our loved ones from getting sick, we wait. We wait for God to answer our prayers.

So the urgent question for us today is how can we wait with hope? That's what the psalmist urges us to do in verse 7, but is that really possible? For let's face it: the boredom and terror this virus inspires could easily allow us to lapse into bitterness and cynicism on the one hand, imagining that nothing anyone can do or say could possibly stave off impending, inevitable doom. On the other hand, we might be tempted to become hardened stoics, expecting only the deliverance that can come from our own hands, denying that God either can or will do anything about our problems.

So, how can we wait with expectation that God will in fact answer our prayers in His way, in His time? How can this time of waiting build our faith instead of tearing it down?

Well, take a look at verse 5 – a big reason for the psalmist's hope is the Word of God. And isn't God's Word in fact filled with promises that He will hear us and answer our prayers? For example, what did John tell us in our responsive reading from chapter 5 of his first epistle? "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him."

Now, those verses are a great encouragement, aren't they? I mean, who wouldn't want to pray when we know our prayers will be answered? But if we want such assurance, according to John we must pray according to God's Will, and that means we must go further, into even greater study of the Word. For how can we know for what we should pray, how can we know what God desires unless we

read it in His Word? It is the Bible alone that can teach us both how to pray and for what we should pray, and thus psalms like this one form wonderful patterns and examples for us.

Okay, so if we know we should base our prayers on God's Word, what else does this psalm tell us about prayer? Well, three out of the eight verses mention the universal problem of sin, so that's certainly a good place to start. In fact, in verse 3, the psalmist admits that, because of his sin, he doesn't even deserve to stand in God's presence, let alone ask God for anything.

And that's not a bad thing for us to remember, either. After all, John tells us in his epistle that no one who is born of God goes on sinning, making a practice of sin. So, if we want to have a close relationship with God, if we want our desires to come so completely into line with His own that we can be sure He will answer all our prayers, we first need to bring God's Word to bear on our own hearts. We need to hold God's Word up to our lives to determine whether our thoughts, words, and deeds are indeed in agreement with God's perfect Law of love. And if we find they are not, we need to confess our sin and turn away from it.

But if the foundation of our prayers should be the desires of God as we find them in His Word, and if the content of our prayers should include confession of any part of our lives that is out of accord with God's Word, John also reminds us in our responsive reading of a beautiful promise that we find in God's Word: that, in spite of our sin, God gives His people the blessing of eternal life in His Son Jesus Christ. Yes, it is Christ alone, the living Word of God who reveals God's perfect holiness to us. But at the same time He also makes it possible for any of us to admit our sin and also be confident that God will redeem us from all of our iniquities. That's the good news – those who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord can be confident not only of God's forgiveness, but also of God's redemption from the power of sin.

John makes this plain in the first chapter of his epistle: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." And John repeats the same idea in our responsive reading from chapter five as well: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life." Those who are believing, trusting in Christ should have no room for doubt – we can know that because He has died in our place, and because the Father has credited Christ's own righteousness to our account, we will live with Jesus forever.

And even though the psalmist didn't know all the specifics of God's plan of redemption in Christ, he was somehow sure God would forgive him. In verses 7 and 8 he expresses his confidence in God's mercy, God's faithful, covenant-keeping love. And he was sure that, no matter how great his sins might be, God would one day pay the ransom for them. Thus, no matter how uncomfortable and unclear the circumstances of his life may have been at the time, he could wait in hope for his forgiving, loving, merciful, redeeming God.

So, having seen the cross of Christ, and having marveled at the reality of His empty tomb, having a much clearer picture both of what our sins deserve and the extent to which God would go to forgive those sins, how much greater should our confidence be?

So in spite of our boredom and fear, let's let the psalmist teach us to pray. Even when we are in the depths of our most serious problems, even when we are in way over our heads, let us keep crying

out to God. Let's keep doing the best we can to measure both our prayers and our lives according to His good and perfect will. Yes, we might have to wait, and wait with great longing. But given the great price the Father has paid for us, given that Christ Himself died in order to save us, we can also wait with great expectation. For we can have no doubt that our loving and forgiving God will pay attention to us and hear our prayers.