

## **A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader**

Hello Sojourners!

Pastor Andy spoke of “Emmaus days” in his message this week, calling for us to slow down and recognize that Christ is walking with us through all of life’s experiences. I know we are all weary of the constant drumbeat of news about the Corona virus, wondering when an “Emmaus day” will occur for us. The waiting can be excruciating! The following article gives some perspective to our waiting, reminding us that God’s promised presence with us and love for us is real and abiding. I encourage all of us to claim that promise, as we pause to break bread with the risen Christ.

-Bill

### **How Long, O Lord?**

By Tom Lambrecht

Someone shared a video with me the other day that showed a three-year-old girl sitting in her house by the glass patio door looking out. She repeatedly shouted, “I hate this house! I hate this house! I hate this house!” I think many of us are right there with her.

We are in a time of waiting. Waiting until things get back to “normal.” Waiting until we can see our friends and family in person again. Waiting until we can go shopping or eat out at a restaurant. Waiting until we can join our brothers and sisters in worship live at a church building!

I feel especially sympathetic toward older people and those with underlying health conditions that make them vulnerable to the coronavirus. They are cut off from most real human contact and have the added worry of their physical susceptibility to the disease. Some of them don’t really understand what is going on, only knowing that they cannot be with their families. And some have the added burden of grieving the loss of a spouse or other family member in solitude and without in-person comfort. Maybe they did not even get to see that person before they died.

How long, O Lord?

Our church has an “adopt a senior” program that matches younger people with our seniors to maintain regular contact with them and reassure them of God’s love and care in the midst of this time of isolation. What can your church do to reach out to older and more vulnerable people?

Others are waiting from another experience, that of sheer exhaustion. Many of our frontline health workers and first responders face daily dangers to their health, while working long shifts to care for the sick. They worry about their families catching the virus from them. Many have worked out a plan to live separately from their families so as not to endanger them. For them, the end of this health crisis cannot come soon enough!

How long, O Lord?

Still others are waiting with a sense of helplessness. Many have lost their jobs and have no source of income. Unemployment is just enough to pay one bill, but not all of them. They could lose their home or apartment, car or business. They may have to go to a food distribution center for the first time in their lives in order to have enough to eat. Others are forced by economic necessity to go to work each day, placing themselves in harm’s way in order to provide for their families. Inadequately protected at work, they worry about bringing the virus home to infect those they love. We think first

## A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

of people in the U.S. in these desperate situations, but many of our fellow United Methodists in other countries are suffering hardship that can soon become life-threatening, particularly in Africa, the Philippines, and Southeast Asia.

How long, O Lord?

Those of us who have been blessed with a secure income can help those in need by channeling our giving through our local church's relief fund. UMCOR has also established a fund to help suffering and needy people all over the world. The good news is that a dollar goes a lot farther in most of the world's nations than it used to.

"How long, O Lord?" is the lament that fills the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. Timothy and Julie Tennent (*A Meditative Journey through the Psalms*, p. 19) remind us that this cry is found nine times throughout the psalms. Most often, the cry boils down to, "how long will my prayers go unanswered?" "How long will I sense God's absence more than his presence?" "How long will justice be denied?" Waiting in anguish seems to be part of the human experience. Of course, it is an experience we hate.

When I was growing up, my Dad always had to be everywhere at least fifteen minutes early, just in case "something happened." We were early to everything — church, school, appointments, visiting family. It seemed at the time as if I spent half my life waiting for something to happen. I grew to hate it, and in adulthood, I usually try to arrive just on time, never early. (Of course, when "something happens," that plan goes out the window!)

We hate to wait, and view that time as unproductive. Waiting in anguish for something we long for is even worse. In the midst of the waiting, however, we can be assured of two things:

First, God is with us in the waiting. God knows everything about us, including our situation and challenges. God sees. He cares. One of God's names is "the God who sees" (*El Roi*). Genesis 16 recounts the story of Hagar, Abraham's servant, who had to endure the mistreatment of her mistress Sarah in order to receive God's blessing and protection for her son, Ishmael. In the process, she learned that God is with us and cares about what we are going through. That doesn't mean that God cuts short the waiting, but it makes the waiting more bearable.

We operate by faith and not by sight. So even when we do not feel God's presence, we know that he is there. His promises in Scripture are certain. We can count on them. God says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." This is such an important promise that he repeats it many times in Scripture: Deuteronomy 31:6-8, Joshua 1:5, Psalm 27:10, Hebrews 13:5 to name a few. We can count on the fact that God is always with us, no matter what we are going through. Those were actually Methodism's founder John Wesley's last words on his deathbed, "Best of all, God is with us."

Second, God uses the waiting times to accomplish his purpose. Sometimes, God causes the waiting to take place. Other times (like the current pandemic), he uses a situation that arises through other causes to accomplish his will.

The history of God's people is full of waiting times. Abraham waited until he was 99 for God to fulfill his promise of a son with Sarah. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before reaching the Promised Land. The people of Israel waited in exile for 70 years — a lifetime! — before they could return to their homeland. The people of

## **A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader**

Israel were without the word of the Lord for over 400 years between the time of Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament) and the arrival of John the Baptist to proclaim God's promise fulfilled. The Church has been waiting 2,000 years for the fulfillment of God's promise that Jesus will come again to establish his kingdom and create a new heaven and a new earth.

Sometimes, the waiting holds the purpose of building a godly character in the life of those waiting. Other times, the waiting is for the right timing for God's action. Sometimes, we find out the reason for the waiting. Many other times, we do not get an answer in this lifetime, but hope for clarity in the life to come. Regardless, we can be assured that God is working in and through the challenges, crises, and waiting times of our lives.

"How long, O Lord" is the anguished cry of our hearts. It is a valid cry of longing. God hears our cry. He knows our hearts and our circumstances. He is with us in the midst of life's struggles, and he will use those struggles to accomplish his will in our lives.

Our role in this pandemic is to trust God with our lives and with the lives of those whom we love. We can patiently wait for the end of this crisis, even as we passionately long for it. In the meantime, we can "do what our hand finds to do" (1 Samuel 10:7, Ecclesiastes 9:10) to serve God and others. And we can continue to grow closer to the Lord who loves us and gave himself for us. Only God knows "how long," but we know the God who knows!

*Source: Thomas Lambrecht is a United Methodist clergyman and the Vice President of Good News.*