

A Spirituality of Waiting

By Henri Nouwen

Henri J. M. Nouwen, a Dutch priest living in Canada, is the author of numerous books on deepening the spiritual life. This article is condensed from a tape available from Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556.

I would like to look at two aspects of waiting. One is the waiting for God, and the other is the waiting of God. We are waiting. God is waiting.

I. Our Waiting for God

A. Introduction to Waiting

Waiting is not popular. 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.

1. Waiting and Fear

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.

2. Waiting in the NT

It impresses me, therefore, that all the figures which appear on the first pages of Luke's Gospel are waiting.

- a. Zechariah and Elizabeth
- b. Mary
- c. Simeon and Anna

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 Mary, then Simeon and Anna are waiting for something new and good to happen to them.

But not all who dwell in Israel are waiting. It is the purified remnant of faithful people who are waiting.

B. The Nature of Waiting

1. Waiting is a movement

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, JB). People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is a 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.

2. Waiting is active

Waiting is also 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.”

3. Waiting is patient

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. 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.

4. Waiting is open-ended

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 the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go.” 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.

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.

5. Waiting is hope

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.

C. How to Wait

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.

1. Examples in the NT

- a. Mary
- b. 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? Mary's visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth's waiting. 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 live up what has already begun in us.

2. Waiting and prayer

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

3. Waiting and spirituality

Our waiting is always shaped by alertness to the word. It is waiting in the knowledge that someone wants to address us. The question, 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.

Simone Weil, a Jewish writer, said, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life."

II. God's Waiting for us

In the passion and resurrection of Jesus we see God as a waiting God. That is the second aspect of waiting that affects our whole spiritual life. So it is to the end of Jesus' life that I want to turn our attention. Let me start with a theory.

A. A story of Waiting

I was invited to visit a friend who was very sick. He was a man about fifty-three years old who had lived a very active, useful, faithful, creative life. Actually, he was a social activist who had cared deeply for people. When he was fifty he found out he had cancer, and the cancer became more and more severe.

When I came to him, he said to me, "Henri, here I am lying in this bed, and I don't even know how to think about being sick. My whole way of thinking about myself is in terms of action, in terms of doing things for people. My life is valuable because I've been able to do many things for many people. And suddenly here I am passive and I can't do anything anymore." And he said to me, "Help me to think about this situation in a new way. Help me to understand what it means that now all sorts of people are doing things to me over which I have no control."

As we talked I realized that he and many others were constantly thinking "How much more can I still do?" Somehow this man had learned to think about himself as a man who was worth only what he was doing.

And so when he got sick his hope seemed to rest on the ideas that he might get better and return to what he had been doing. I realized too, that this way of thinking was hopeless because the man had cancer and was going to get worse and worse. He would die soon. If the spirit of this man was dependent on how much he would still be able to do, what did I have to say to him?

B. Action and passion in waiting

It was in the context of these thoughts that together we read a book called The Stature of Waiting by British author V. H. Vanstone. Vanstone writes about Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and the events that followed. I want to draw on this powerful book in what follows. It helped my friend and me struggle together to understand better what it means to move from action to passion.

1. Jesus' passion

The central word in the story of Jesus' arrest is one I never thought much about. It is to be handed over. That is what happened in Gethsemane. Jesus was handed over. Some translations say that Jesus was "betrayed." But the Greek says, "to be handed over." Judas handed Jesus over (Mark 14:10). But the remarkable thing is that the same word is used not only for Judas but also for God. God did not spare Jesus, but handed him over to benefit us all (see Romans 8:32).

Immediately after Jesus is handed over, he becomes the one to whom things are being done. He's being arrested; he's being led to the High Priest; he's being taken before Pilate; he's being crowned with thorns; he's being nailed on a cross. Things are being done to him over which he has no control. That is the meaning of passion – being the recipient of other people's initiatives.

2. Our passion

Not to be in control is part of the human condition. It is important for us to realize that when Jesus says, "It is accomplished" (John 19:30), he does not simply mean, "I have done all the things I wanted to do." He also means, "I have allowed things to be done to me that needed to be done to me in order for me to fulfill my vocation." Jesus does not fulfill his vocation in action only, but also in passion.

a. Passion is waiting

Passion is a kind of waiting – waiting for what other people are going to do. In a way, his agony is not simply the agony of approaching death. It is also the agony of having to wait. It is the agony of a God who depends on us for how God is going to live out the divine presence among us. It is the agony of the God who, in a very mysterious way, allows us to decide how God will be God.

All action ends in passion because the response to our action is out of our hands. That is the mystery of friendship, the mystery of community – they always involve waiting. And that is the mystery of Jesus' love.

C. Outcome of passion

All these insights into Jesus' passion were very important in the discussions with my friend. He realized that after much hard work he had to wait. He came to see that his vocation as a human being would be fulfilled not just in his actions but also in his passion. And together we began to understand that precisely in this waiting the glory of God and our new life both become visible.

III. The glory of God and our new life

A. Resurrection of Christ

Resurrection is not just life after death. First of all, it is the life that bursts forth in Jesus' passion, in his waiting. The story of Jesus' suffering reveals that the resurrection is breaking through even in the midst of the passion.

New life becomes visible not only in the resurrection on the third day, but already in the passion, in the being handed over. Why? Because it is in the passion that the fullness of God's love shines through. It is supremely a waiting love, a love that does not seek control.

B. Experiencing the resurrection

When we allow ourselves to feel fully how we are being acted upon, we can come in touch with a new life that we were not even aware was there. This was the question my sick friend and I talked about constantly. Could he taste the new life in the midst of his passion? Could he see that in his being acted upon by the hospital staff he was already being prepared for a deeper love? It was a love that had been underneath all the action, but he had not tasted it fully. So together we began to see that in the midst of our suffering and passion, in the midst of our waiting, we can already experience the resurrection.

C. We are not in control

If we look at our world, how much are we really in control? Isn't our life in large part passion? Of course, we are active, but the margin in which we are acted upon by people, events, the culture in which we live, and many other factors is largely beyond our control. This becomes especially clear when we notice how many people are handicapped, chronically ill, elderly, or restricted economically.

It seems that there are more and more people in our society who have less and less influence on the decisions that affect their own existence. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to recognize that the largest part of our existence involves waiting in the sense of being acted upon. But the life of Jesus tells us that not to be in control is part of the human condition. His vocation was fulfilled not just in action but also in passion, in waiting.

D. God is in control

Imagine how important that message is for people in our world. If it is true that God in Jesus Christ is waiting for our response to divine love, then we can discover a whole new perspective on how to wait in life. We can learn to be obedient people who do not always try to go back to the action but who recognize the fulfillment of our deepest humanity in passion, in waiting. If we can do this, I am convinced that we will come in touch with the glory of God and our own new life. Then our service to others will include our helping them see the glory breaking through, not only where they are active but also where they are being acted upon.

And so the spirituality of waiting is not simply our waiting for God. It is also participating in God's own waiting for us and in that way coming to share in the deepest purity of love, which is God's love.