

# **Cherish the Hope: Waiting**

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Waiting and Controlling seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. Waiting implies that things are sometimes beyond our control, that we must wait for some new constellation to take shape before we can move on. And controlling implies that there is no need to wait, but simply take bold action, seize the day, give a new shape to our reality right now. Why wait?

Are we in control? There might be an argument on the positive side of that question. It would appear so. Human beings are remarkable in so many ways, and we seem to shape the environment around us to suit our desires. Money buys a lot of control. Elon Musk spent over a quarter of a billion dollars in this last election. His empire depends to a large extent upon government grants, and now he is in charge of reducing government regulations. Rarely, has there been such a controlling action by a single individual in our nation's history. And folks, he's an African immigrant! Money buys a lot, doesn't it?

The Pendergasts controlled politics in Jackson County for many years, when the mob held sway over many public decisions. They demanded loyalty. Fraud and intimidation often caused Kansas City voter turnout to be close to 100 percent in the Pendergast days. Despite Prohibition, Pendergast's machine and a bribed police force allowed alcohol and gambling. Additionally, many elections were fixed to keep political friends in power.

The Pendergast machine had grown through 45 years, first under James Pendergast, and, after 1911, under his younger brother Thomas, until it controlled Kansas City and Jackson County. One of the top stories of 1939 was the collapse of the powerful Pendergast machine in Kansas City under the attacks of Governor Stark and U. S. District Attorney Milligan and Judge Reeves. The Kansas City Star played a key role in exposing their crimes.

Their control had come to an end.

But look at autocratic dictatorships around the world, in North Korea, in Russia, in China, in too many African nations? These dictators seem to control everything and everyone. North Koreans are nearly starving in hopeless deprivation while their dictator spends untold millions on nuclear weapon development without a whimper of dissent.

But does money truly buy control? In the ultimate sense? Can money control relationships? Can it control peoples' reactions to one another? In the end, can money buy loyalty? Can it buy silence? Can money buy love? Can money buy friendships? Can money buy honesty? Can money buy virtue? Can money buy goodness? Can money buy faith or truth? Can money buy happiness? Can it buy integrity? Can money save anyone's soul?

Money and connections can buy control, but seemingly only for a while. Jesus said, “What good does it do to gain the whole world yet lose your soul.” (Mt 16:26)

Are we in control? Look at Gaza, at what human beings have done to each other. Look at Ukraine, at what human beings have done to each other. Look at South Korea, where an ultra-right-wing president declared martial law in order to broaden his powers, and has subsequently been removed from office, putting his nation in constitutional turmoil and chaos. South Koreans themselves have risen to take back control.

In Myanmar, formerly Burma, the Army has had full control after toppling a democratically elected President. However, if you look at Myanmar today, ethnic armies now control over 50% of the land and they appear to have momentum. The Army has lost the respect of the population of that Asian nation.

Are we in control? Doesn't it appear that so much in our society is out of control? That so many things are messy, uncontrollable? We are now to the point in human domination of the earth where we have to ask, can we control earth's environment? Can we control the quality of our food in grocery stores? Can we control future pandemics? Can we control big banks and financial institutions? Can we control the warming of the earth? Can we control fires burning because of intense Santa Ana winds? Can we control hurricanes that strike inland, as it did last year in Western North Carolina? Can we control earth's future? Can we control our future?

So much appears beyond our control. When we are in a control mode, hope is irrelevant. We depend upon power instead of hope.

But I would maintain this morning that beauty cannot be controlled. It is hard to control art and creativity. Heroism cannot be controlled. Defiance cannot be controlled. Wisdom or insight cannot be controlled. Trust cannot be controlled. The human spirit cannot ultimately be controlled, just for a time, for a while, until people have had enough.

If you are looking for a job, waiting is the hardest part. You cannot control which jobs will be offered to you. If you are looking for a life partner, you cannot control love. And you cannot purchase love. If you are waiting for your teenaged or young adult children to make wise decisions, you can only wait. If you try to manipulate their choices, it will only come back to haunt you.

If you are dealing with a loved one who has a disease in which there is no cure, you wait. You may try to take corrective action, but mostly, you wait.

If you have made a proposal to someone, you have to wait for their response.

I have been serving you as a pastor for nearly 12 years. We would love to have more new members who would fit our church's mission. Do you know what is remarkable? The racial composition of our congregation isn't changing. It's about the same now as it was when I came back to this church. Our demographics aren't changing.

Yet, there is a problem. Nearly everyone in our society has been raised in a racial silo. Nearly every Christian in our society has worshipped in a racial silo. Nearly all our friendships have taken place in a racial silo. And so, as a church, we wait to meet those people who are ready for something different. People who are ready to form friendships across the racial chasm of our society. We can't force it. We must be patient because God is not finished with us – not by a long shot.

We celebrate 170 years as a congregation this Spring. We are the oldest continuing Protestant church founded in Kansas City. And yet the church I joined in 1968 is nearly unrecognizable today. What is God going to do with us next? I suspect the most honest answer is: wait and see!

Wait and see what God is going to do with us as a church, as a people, as a congregation! Wait and see! Because so much of the outcome is beyond our control.

But, after 53 years as a local church pastor, I can say, we can control some parts of it, but not all of it. If someone had told me when I was a pastoral intern here in 1969 that our church would look as it does today, I would have said, "No way!" How could such a transformation take place? Except by God's Transforming Hand?

When Jan and I were first married, we were both involved in careers focused upon children and youth. Jan began in early childhood education, in nursery schools, day care centers, head start programs. And my focus was upon Christian education, mostly of children and youth. For 11 years, when people would ask, we would say, "We aren't going to have children because we spend all our time and energy with children already." Other people's children. We were the week-end substitute parents for so many who needed a week-end away. That began in our very first year of marriage.

I don't know what changed our minds exactly. But together, finally, we decided that we should have children. What a change that brought to our lives! When I consider my life today, without our three granddaughters, I shudder to consider how much joy and meaning we would have lost. This path isn't for everyone, of course, not.

The story of our family could not have been engineered or planned. I suspect the same is true of your family. How did we turn out this way? How did it happen? Often, we just had to wait because the outcomes are beyond our control. And no amount of money could have changed the equation.

How did you get to this place in your life, the place where you stand today? And how do you get to the next place, except, to learn the art of waiting. And hoping. Hoping that some new constellation comes into form and new doors of opportunity and relationship and meaning come to us. We worship the God who is making all things new! The God of New Possibilities.

Nikos Kazantzakis, author of *Zorba the Greek*, tells this story:

I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the back of a tree just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited awhile, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes faster than life. The case opened; the butterfly started slowly crawling out, and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath, in vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently, it needed the struggle to make it strong, and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled, before its time.

It struggled desperately and, a few seconds, later, died in the palm of my hand. That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the external rhythm.

The art of waiting, the art of hoping, is in our hands, friends. And life is worth the wait! Amen.