



SAINT LUKE'S

"THE LONG WAIT"

THE 23RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
YEAR A

WISDOM 6:12-16
PSALM 70
1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18
MATTHEW 25:1-13

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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This gospel parable is about the full coming of the kingdom of God: what we call the Second Coming of Christ. Every week we say *Christ will come again*. The Second Coming is central to our faith and our readings at this time of year point towards the season of Advent¹ as we prepare anew for Christ's First Coming and our waiting for the Second. The people of Matthew's community are starting to realize just how long that wait might be. The early church communities had expected Jesus to return within a generation - or two at most. God has not delivered on their expectation. And so in this parable, the groom's arrival is certain but the timing is not.

The moral of this parable is often summarized: Be prepared! We know a lot about feeling unprepared these days. We found ourselves unprepared for acts of terror on a bike path a mile south of here. We were unprepared for shootings in a Texas Church during Sunday worship. This parable reveals a different kind of unprepared. Unprepared to wait.

The wise bridesmaids take extra oil not for the days-long wedding feast but for the delay. The wise bridesmaids *expect* darkness before light and waiting before celebration.

In Scripture, searching, waiting, longing and hoping are spiritually important. We think of the lost sheep, the lost coin. The woman sweeps her house searching for the coin. The shepherd walks all over the hillsides looking for the one lost sheep, leaving the 99 to do so. These searches are holy. What may seem to be everyday drudgery - housework

¹ Literally the Coming (Lat: Adventus)

and shepherding – in Jesus’ parables is a stand-in for God’s search for us. There are countless examples of waiting and watching and seeking that are filled with God’s presence. We will hear about some of them in the next few weeks. God is in the waiting of Mary in Advent²; God is the wise men seeking Jesus in their studies, long before they set off for Bethlehem. Waiting, uncertainty, lost-ness can be full of God’s presence. Waiting in Scripture is rarely wasted time or aimless, or a holding pattern while God makes up God’s mind about what to do next. Without the searching and yearning, there would often be no finding. The Christian life is in part a life of waiting. And even more, learning how to wait *for* God, *with* God.

There is a painting by James Janknegt called “The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids”. The bridesmaids are all sharing a house together. (Roommates!) In the painting you can see inside the house and upstairs, the foolish bridesmaids are having a slumber party. They are watching TV and eating popcorn; some are sleeping on the couch. Today they might watching Netflix, and glued to their smartphones. Tweeting. The unwise bridesmaids are filling the wait with distractions and entertainments. When the time is fulfilled and the groom is walking down the path, they are completely unprepared and in the harsh world of Jesus’ parable the consequences of their not paying attention are severe. They cannot redeem the time they have wasted. It is past and gone. (Is that in fact so different from the world we know?) Downstairs in the same house, the wise bridesmaids are at the door with torches. The border of the painting – all around the house and

² Mary ponders (Luke 1:29) the angel’s words. Later she treasures and ponders the shepherds’ words (Luke 2:19) in her heart, waiting until the time is fulfilled for deeper understanding and revelation from God.

outside – is full of torches and what at first look like pull-top canisters like soda cans or the chafing fuel (sterno) canisters you put under chafing trays to keep the food hot. But taking a very close look at a better reproduction of the painting online, I see that they are in fact batteries for the torches. On the outside of each battery is a descending dove. Symbol of the Holy Spirit. In Janknegt's understanding, the fuel, the energy for the long wait is the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean for the oil in our lamps to run out? We probably know that feeling. It is when we feel God has abandoned us and will not show up again. We will wait in vain. An empty lamp is when we lose hope. Is that our fault? Is a lamp of faith that goes out our responsibility? Isn't that like blaming the victim? It's not as simple as going out to buy more oil.

There are things we can do to stoke the light of faith. What we are responsible for is this. It is our responsibility to learn and understand who we are and who God is. We need to understand how our life connects with God's life. That is what the Bible Challenge is all about, for those of us on that journey this year. We are seeking to learn and connect with The Story - the real story - in which we find ourselves. Connecting with God's life is where we find the Holy Spirit, the fuel, to keep going and keep our hopes alive and our hearts light. And when our faith and hope feel cold and dead, then what we do is we let our feet bring us here, because we know we cannot be faithful all alone. We gather to listen, to praise, to receive the sacraments, to be fed by the

strength and presence of God in each other. (You may in fact be here today to strengthen some else's faith as well as your own). Eventually, our hopes, the light of faith, will re-kindle. This is the usual ebb and flow of the spiritual life over a lifetime. What we are responsible for is showing up in the right place at the right time. If this particular church doesn't do it for you, find one that does - but don't give up on the church. The Holy Spirit is the fuel and this is the chief place in the world where the Holy Spirit has promised to show up for us. The church is the battery with the dove on it. Often I hear people say: "I always feel better after church. I don't know exactly why because my life is the same when I walk back into the world, but somehow I always feel better". It certainly is a sacred mystery, but the reason is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit replenishes the light of faith in us and gives us strength to share the light of Christ in the world. The light of Christ is for scattering darkness, and there are no forces of evil, fear, or powers of this present world that can overcome it.

AMEN

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