

A Lesson in Waiting

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 19
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 12:32-40

The future -- it has always held a kind of fascination for us humans, hasn't it? From Nostradamus to Alvin Toffler to Hal Lindsay to Jerry Falwell, we have announced our predictions about what lies beyond the horizon. And most of those prognostications, fortunately, have been wrong.

"The telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us." Thus read a Western Union memo of 1876.

"The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?" David Sarnoff's associates wrote that in response to his urgings for investment in the radio in the 1920's.

"I'm just glad it'll be Clark Gable who's falling on his face and not Gary Cooper." Said Gary Cooper upon his decision not to take the leading role in a movie. The movie? *Gone with the Wind*.

"We don't like their sound; guitar music is on the way out." Decca Recording Co. rejecting a British Rock group in 1962. You can guess which group. The Beatles.

Yes, humans have shown such marvelous insight into the future, haven't we? Today's Gospel text deals with the future and one of those areas that predictors have loved to announce with firm assurance -- namely, the coming Kingdom of God. Over-anxious believers have worked out all manner of time-tables purporting to read the signs of the times, and boldly announcing the end of the world and Jesus' second coming. But much time, energy and anxiety could be saved if folks would just heed what Jesus says at the end of our text for today: "the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

But notice, first of all, how Jesus approaches this subject of the coming Kingdom of God. He begins with the words: "Do not be afraid." We've heard those before, haven't we? These were the same words spoken by the angels to the Bethlehem shepherds on the occasion of his first coming into our world. Now, here, they are spoken about his second coming. And the reason why we need not fear is because God's good pleasure is to give us this Kingdom. We cannot earn it. We cannot build it. It is a gift of grace. It is a promise of the Father to his children. The Kingdom of God is on the way. And our job is to wait for it and be ready.

So, it is that task, the waiting and being ready, that we need to examine today. Let's start with the waiting part. We pray, do we not, every Sunday, for the coming Kingdom in our Lord's Prayer, but in spite of that, we all know that waiting isn't easy. Most of us regard waiting as a necessary evil. The fact that sometimes it is

necessary doesn't diminish our frustration. To wait in a long checkout line at the grocery store is irritating. To be stopped on the way home by a changing traffic light is annoying. To sit in the doctor's office or in a hospital emergency room and to wait is almost unendurable. We hate to wait.

We are used to filling our days and our time with activities, with doings. We set schedules and measure ourselves against them so that we can know how much progress is being made. We make lists of things to do and check them off as each is accomplished. Our very identity and sense of worth is often measured with these activities completed, these projects checked off. And so, waiting is consciously or unconsciously felt to be a threat to our self-esteem.

And yet . . . and yet . . . waiting is often a crucial component and an important part of all of life. It takes time to heal from physical, not to mention emotional and psychological hurts. A pregnancy can't be hurried, can it? It takes nine months, or the better part of it, and no amount of impatience can change that. It is the frustrated farmer who scatters his seed and attends to it night and day hoping that by coaxing it along it will sprout and grow more rapidly. Not until the time is fulfilled will it do so. Waiting is the only option he has. And we might get even more profound here with this thought by saying that wisdom rarely comes to us as a flash of insight, but rather unfolds itself over time and experiences, year by year, day by day, event by event. There is no getting wise beyond the waiting that years brings.

Jesus' words about waiting, therefore, are reassuring because they remind us that waiting is not only acceptable to God but seems intended by divine design as a major part of life. Waiting is a part of the faith we live. The Kingdom comes to those who wait. And so, what lesson is there in waiting for us from this text before us today? There are two, I think, and an addendum or two about being ready.

The first lesson on waiting becomes clear when we analyze why waiting makes us so upset. When we are forced to wait for or on anything, it becomes abundantly clear that we are not in control of the circumstances. Waiting is the vocation of the powerless. In our power-conscious culture where being in charge is crucial to our identity and self esteem, waiting forces us to face the fact that someone else is running the show. Waiting delineates the boundary between our power and God's ability. We are not the center of the universe nor is God at our beck and call. Being forced to wait emphasizes the fact that the power to deliver us from the bondage of our sinful selves is not ours to command.

But the good news, the really good news, is that the God we worship and praise has the power to give us the kingdom even if we do not have the ability to create it. Waiting reminds us that we are not God, that there is one who will bring to completion that which he began in the fullness of time.

This brings us to the second truth about waiting. This fullness of time always lies in the future, but if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can catch glimpses of it now, which can give us hope for the days we live in the waiting time. To wait, therefore, is to affirm that this present situation, no matter how bad or good, is not

the full Kingdom of God. Waiting presupposes that something is yet to happen, that the present is not the end of the adventure, that there is something yet to be hoped for and lived toward. Waiting invites us to live on tiptoes because the best view of the scene lies just over the horizon. To wait is to affirm that life is not all it can and will be. Not only is more to come, as we catch glimpses of that Kingdom, that foretaste of the feast to come, but we know that the *best* is yet to come.

People who are content with the status quo have no future, for it is the future which promises what is not yet. People who change society and make a difference in the way things are are people who have learned to wait. They live in the present, but have their eyes fixed to the horizon. They live as though the future is where the fulfillment of their waiting is to be found.

And what is it we are to do while we wait? Verse 35 of our text today gives us two admonitions: "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit." Older translations used to read "have your loins girded," which meant to have the folds of your long garments tucked into your belt so that you can work. "Having your lamps lit" means ready to face what life has before us. And the Christian Church has always understood girded loins and lit lamps to mean working and praying, two sides of the Christian life.

We work in the manner of our Lord, Jesus Christ, serving the needs of those around us. That is first and foremost. We serve in the name and for the sake of the one who is coming to serve us. That's what we do in the waiting time.

And, we pray. We gather together in community to pray for this Kingdom. To hear stories about the One who is coming again. To gain strength from this community of faith to do our working, our serving, out there in the place where the Kingdom is already arriving. And in our working in the name of Jesus and in our praying in the name of Jesus, we will prepare ourselves and we won't be surprised when he comes, because in our lives of faith, we will always be ready.

I came across a powerful witness to this truth. It is a quote from a pastor in Zimbabwe, and I think it captures in poignant terms the message of today's Gospel text.

I am a disciple of Christ. I will not let up, look back, or slow down. My past is redeemed, my future secure. I am done with low living, small planning, smooth knees, mundane talking, chintzy giving and dwarfed goals. I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotion, or popularity. . . My face is set; my goal is sure. . . My God is reliable, my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, delayed or deluded. I will not flinch in the face of adversity, nor negotiate at the table of the enemy, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I am a disciple of Christ. I must go until He comes, speak of all I know of Him and work until He stops me. And when He comes for his own, by the grace of God, He will have no problem recognizing me, because my colors are clear.

Those words are a powerful witness to Christ, made even more powerful when we learn that this was the last, the final, journal entry made by this Zimbabwean pastor before he was put to death for his faith. This man knew what needed to be done in the waiting for the Kingdom of God.

AMEN.

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