

Sermon: "I'll Wait"  
Advent 2 Cycle "A"  
Alternate Text: Matthew 25:1-13

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"Eat dessert first," goes the saying. "Life is short." Get the good stuff up front, because you never know what will happen next anyway. And what will it hurt, if the world suddenly comes to an end, if I still have chocolate cake in my mouth instead of succotash? Eat dessert *first*.

And in our modern world, Christmas is dessert, so why piddle around with something like Advent? In most houses, the trees are up, there are already gifts under the tree and already little ones rattling them to see if they can figure out what's inside, or how to open them without getting caught!

Americans have now *perfected* Christmas as the dessert of the year, we who pace in front of an elevator which has not arrived, and argue out loud with red lights that won't turn green – or just go through them anyway – and have entire conversations with our microwave oven about how slow it is. Recently I saw an interesting opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times*' Health Section, written by a patient who is tired of waiting for her doctors' appointments. And with dignity and courage she upbraids the medical profession for *assuming* that the doctor's time is more valuable than the patient's time. No one wants to be kept waiting.

We can't wait. Even instant gratification is too slow in the year 2007. The national elections are still 11 months away, and all the major candidates are suffering from over-exposure because they can't wait, and neither can the media. And Christmas? Your neighbors' Christmas trees will be dry, brittle and in the recycling tub the day after. Then in a few short weeks, both the Valentine candy and the Easter candy will be for sale at the same time. *We can't wait*.

Or, is it that we see *no point* in waiting, if there is nothing *worth waiting for*?

Today's Gospel text— and I have chosen an alternative text for this Second Sunday in Advent—takes a different tack on waiting than what you'd expect. Even scholars debate its significance. Some have ventured that Jesus never told this parable, because it was used by Christians almost right away as a parable about Jesus' return, his "Second Coming." For, even two thousand years ago, people couldn't wait for the coming of the Lord — couldn't wait for the end of the world, for the Judgment Day, couldn't wait for God to meet out justice to the people who had hurt *them*. Human beings have always had a strange sense of what it means to wait.

In our day, if we were fundamentalists, we might still want to take it this way, and we would insist: "Jesus is coming, so accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior *before it is too late*." Well, yes, I cannot say that is *entirely wrong*, but I think it misses the point. And perhaps that's why millions of people whose only impression of the Christian faith is based on fundamentalist thinking have walked away from Jesus Christ. When we hear the word of God in the Scriptures, we miss the point if we *begin* with the idea that it contains a threat: "Believe or *else*. Repent, or *else*. God loves you, if you obey all the rules, or *else*. Well, . . . no. As I have been repeating from time to time in the last few months (my very own sound-byte), "God's word is always an *invitation*, not an ultimatum." God's word is always an *invitation*, not an ultimatum.

But am I right? The earliest Christians took this parable to mean that the Bridegroom was Jesus; his arrival or coming in the story symbolizes the Judgment Day; the wedding feast means the Messianic banquet in heaven; and the maidens or virgins are either good and bad Christians, or believers and unbelievers who were caught unprepared for the Judgment Day.

And in this story, the strange tack taken is not between those who *patiently waited* and those who *couldn't wait*— but between those who *faithfully* waited, and those who *gave up* — who had

abandoned any expectation that the Bridegroom was coming. In other words, those who did not think there was anything *worth waiting for*.

Now — and this is a very brief bit of Bible Study — for those of you who can't wait for the sermon to end!), please note that not even the experts can explain the customs of the day in this story. Most of Jesus' stories were based on ordinary events in daily life, right?—although told sometimes with a twist. But scholars know very little about the wedding customs of Jesus' times. Why were people waiting for the groom? Was there a custom of young unmarried girls to wait with candles burning for the groom, the way they wait today to catch the Bride's bouquet? And why would he be expected in the middle of the night? And where were they waiting?—at the Bride's home?— the Groom's home? Or the synagogue?

If you can't wait for the answer, it's *okay*. There is no answer. Nobody knows. Some scholars think this little tale was *not* told as an elaborate allegory about the end of the world or the judgment day at all. It was told just as a simple illustration from daily life *about waiting, and about what is really valuable in life*.

When we read this passage just a few moments ago, I'll bet you couldn't wait, and you breezed right past the first words of the text in Matthew 25: "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." The Evangelist Matthew liked that phrase; it occurs over and over in his Gospel about Jesus: "The Kingdom of heaven." Now, please, wait for me to explain: It is *not* a place. This is not a name for a geographic location somewhere up there above the clouds inside celestial walls and guarded by pearly gates, with the King seated on his throne in the midst of it all." For Matthew, "the Kingdom of Heaven" is not about the after-life or a "gated community" full of expensive mansions, the place where *some good* people and *all* Lutherans go when they die!

The Kingdom of heaven is a state of mind and heart, a state of being. It is code language for *the way things will be where God reigns*. It is the way life will be ordered when you believe Jesus is Lord. But God reigns *now*, and in most of the world it is nothing like heaven with pearly gates. *God reigns, amen?*—even if people do not accept God's rule, and do not accept Jesus as Lord. So, for Matthew, the reign of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is the reality which you and I have found, and entered into, with faith.

We know *it's not obvious* in this world that Jesus Christ is Lord. It is not obvious that God rules, in a world where human suffering and human greed seem to control everything; where waste and excess predominate; where sham and phoney appearances captivate the media; and where there are no longer any true leaders, just "handlers" and "spin doctors." How do we *keep faith* in the Lord of all in such a sad and shallow world?

Jesus' one, constant teaching, as we have it laid out in story after story, parable after parable, is that the reign of God, or "the kingdom of heaven" is coming. The world as we see it will not last. In fact it is collapsing from its own excesses and pretenses and heartlessness. But the kingdom of heaven is coming — an entirely new order where peace and justice will rule, where gratitude and generosity will mean a feast for all. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

And there he went on to describe the new order as "upside down": where the meek, not the aggressive, will inherit the earth, where the mourners will laugh, where those who hunger and thirst for the right things will be satisfied, where those who show mercy will receive mercy—in other words, where the very way in which human beings treat each other *will change the world*.

*So the Kingdom of heaven is coming, but it comes one heart at a time*. You have prayed the Lord's Prayer. We say it every week. It is the center and heart of the Christian faith and piety. You've probably even heard stories of people hospitalized, laying in a coma, who woke from their sleep to pray this prayer when they heard their loved ones repeating these words.

And in the middle of it, “Thy **kingdom come!**” To pray “Our father in heaven, may your kingdom come,” is the utmost faith that what Jesus has taught us is trustworthy and true. That where God reigns, where the Kingdom comes, one heart at a time, the world will be transformed.

So Martin Luther wrote, in his explanation of those words in the Small Catechism, “What does this mean? To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us.”

To pray, is to put ourselves in the middle of God’s reign, God’s gracious rule, and to become foot soldiers of the movement to change the world to become that place where the mourning will laugh and the hungry will feast, where the meek and the outcast will have a place at the table, and those who show mercy will receive the same as they give.

What an interesting twist *that* would be on the old custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas! What’s on **your list** this year? How about this: that we all show mercy, *exchange* mercy with one another? Not just this little congregation, but how about all over town? All over America, all over the world? Christmas, after all, has become a world-wide, secular holiday of gift-giving. Why not show mercy, and give compassion? *How different* the world would be if we took those things which God has given us in Jesus Christ, and gave them to others, expecting to receive **the same** in return: not “stuff,” but mercy and justice, love and understanding, grace and forgiveness, compassion and kindness.

My friends, the *patient, faithful waiting* of Advent is the faithful believing that our waiting on the “Lord’s coming” is *not a chronological, calendar event* at all. Waiting is preparing ourselves *inside*. Trimming our lamps, filling them with oil, is preparing ourselves *spiritually* to wait on that which is worth waiting for! The Kingdom of heaven is coming! Christmas comes but once a year, they say, but you can live in a constant state of Advent all year long, if you align your heart with the heart of God: Wait for God, wait upon justice, be patient with others and forgive those who trespass against you. Show mercy. Pray that the Kingdom comes to you, no matter how long it takes. Put yourself in the picture. Put your heart in the gift you give to others—the *priceless* gift of Christmas is the gift by which Jesus speaks to each of us: “Give yourself away.” Amen.