

Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24: 36-44

Watching and Waking
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On this Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent, many sermons will be preached on the theme of Advent as the season of waiting. I know this because my favorite sermon sites, like surefiresermons.com and pulpitwinners.org, are full of such sermons. Even my most favorite site of all, sermonsforpastorswantingraises.com, which you'd think would be an activist site, only offers Advent sermons about waiting.

And in part, this is a good thing. This morning's call to worship ties Advent to the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, "a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Growth takes time, time one must wait. Also, at the heart of Advent, rests the holy waiting of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth waiting for their children to be born. The stillness and waiting of Advent bring to mind other scriptures: "Be still and know that I am God.", "a time to keep silence and a time to speak", "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." All of this tells us that we need waiting as a time of growth, healing, and strengthening. Call this again "holy waiting", for us it's finding peace in a busy season.

There is another kind of waiting to which Advent invites us. This is waiting in a different key, watchful, eager waiting, waiting with intensity, being awake and alert. My favorite preacher, Peter Gomes, calls this "impatient waiting". We've all experienced this. At a book study at my home church, we were messing around, slow getting started. My pastor told us not to worry; we had lots of time. "Not when you get to be my age," was the response of an older woman in the group. She had a point. None of us has unlimited time to wait without ultimately acting.

Patience of course can be a good thing, Gomes says, but be careful. It can degrade into self satisfaction and the easy embrace of the status quo. Today's two passages warn us against this kind of patience. They counsel impatient waiting, especially impatience with the status quo. In them waiting is impatient because of what one is waiting for.

In Matthew, the Parousia or Second Coming, the return of the risen Christ to earth in glory, is what one is waiting for. This is an ancient doctrine of church, the culmination of the liturgy, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again." In the words of blessing I'll use when we celebrate communion later today, I'll end with ". . . for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you do to show the Lord's death until He comes again." Christ, who came once as a child, shall return to us again in glory. We don't know the day or the hour of the Second Coming. Thus we must be prepared and always ready. It could be now.

This challenge to live in high expectation reminds me of my early days as a parish minister, a time when ministers still made unannounced pastoral calls, even at night. I did this until Sue informed me that if a minister did such a thing to her she would shoot him or her. I'm sure she was speaking metaphorically. Still, these unannounced calls had their benefits. Parishioners always had to be ready. They never knew when the pastor might drop in, so keep your Bible on the coffee table and your liquor hidden in a cabinet.

What do you do while you wait expectantly. Are you to be emotionally watchful, while physically killing time? No, from what follows in Matthew after the verses that were read for us, it's clear that while we wait we are also to be doing, doing those things which are appropriate to the one for whom we are waiting, the risen Christ. Doing the work Christ called us to do, this is how we are to fill our waiting.

Immediately after the verses we heard, three stories Jesus tells are vital for our understanding of the impatient waiting of Advent. First the parable of the wise and foolish virgins is about waiting itself. The foolish virgins are those who did not bring enough oil to keep their lamps burning through the night as they await the coming of the bridegroom, who stands for Christ. While they are off trying to buy more oil, the bridegroom arrives. Unlike the foolish virgins, we must be prepared to wait as long as it takes.

The second story, the parable of the talents, specifically tells us one of the things we are to do while we wait. Rather than kill time while we wait, letting our gifts atrophy, we are to use whatever talents God has given us to do God's will during our waiting time. We are not to wait in fear, afraid we will make a mistake. We are to wait in hope, using our gifts for the glory of God.

The final story leaves no doubt about what we are to do while we wait and also how fateful our decision about how to deploy our waiting time will be. In this story, the parable of the final judgment, Jesus says,

When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. . . . then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it unto me.'

What to do while we await the second coming? Do social justice; serve Christ by serving those in need. Work to transform those conditions and institutions that cause our brothers and sisters to suffer. This is what one does while waiting impatiently.

Briefly, the passage in Romans we heard pushes this theme of watchful, eager, active waiting still further. In it we are urged to be wide awake in our waiting, so that we are alert for every opportunity to do the justice Christ calls us to do. Repeatedly we are charged to be awake to the present moment. What we are being urged to do is reminiscent of a story from the Buddhist tradition:

It is said that soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the extraordinary radiance and peacefulness of his presence. The man stopped and asked, "My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?"

"No," said the Buddha.

"Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?"

Again the Buddha answered, "No."

"Are you a man?"

"No."

"Well, my friend, what then are you?"

The Buddha replied, "I am awake."

Likewise both of today's texts urge us to be awake, for it is "time for you to awaken from sleep, the night is far gone, the day is at hand." During Advent we are invited to live on the edge of expectation, totally awake to the One who is coming. Indeed when we do justice, we live as if the Christ is already here.

Note: Any similarity between web sights mentioned in this sermon and those actually in existence is an unfortunate coincidence.