

## “WAITING FOR (THIS PARTICULAR) GOD”

A Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, November 12, 2017

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Which “Sunday after Pentecost” is this? The 23rd?

Really?

I thought I should check. There’s this app for calculating the duration between two dates. I put in my best guess of the date the twelve apostles stood before a crowd in Jerusalem and proclaimed the gospel of salvation, the day “about three thousand” people were baptized. And today’s date. What did the app tell me? Today is approximately the 103,696th Sunday after Pentecost.

Liturgically we count from last Pentecost Sunday, June 4, early summer, which seems long enough ago. Twenty-three weeks! to be precise. Nearly half a year!

Jesus told a story about waiting a long time.

Ten bridesmaids—this was a very big wedding!—took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. The bridegroom was delayed. They slept. But some were thinking ahead. They had extra oil.

This is one parable of Jesus which increases in relevance every week. The church, here represented as the bridesmaids, all dressed up and ready to celebrate with joy the feast which has no end, has been waiting for God for 103,696 weeks. Waiting for deliverance. Waiting for “the end.” Waiting for the Lord to make things clear to everyone. Waiting for God to wipe away every tear. Waiting for vindication. Clarity. Rest.

We often read Isaiah 25 at funerals, an imaginative description of the Day of the Lord—the arrival of the bridegroom:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,

and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,

for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the LORD for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

There is defiance in the last few lines. “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.” It sounds as though the people who are declaring their faith have had other options. Other gods have come along, and said “Hop in! I’ll take you where you want to go!” and the people of God have said, “No thank you. We are waiting for a particular God. The Lord our God. That God is the one we want to deliver us, not some other god. The God of mercy and compassion, that is. The God whom we know because of his plenipotentiary Son Jesus Christ. That’s the god we’re waiting for, thank you very much!

As if to say, “it has been the Lord’s rod and staff which have comforted us as we went through our darkest valleys—so we want that Lord to bring it home.”

This! This! This is the Lord for whom we have waited. This is the result we have been waiting for. Now we can celebrate.

Why be so fussy? Why wait 103,696 weeks? Why not settle for more attainable and visible ends, more compatible gods? Why have we navigated these thousands of years by that one star, and not by others?

Because our God is the Lord of heaven and earth, and at the same time a God of mercy and compassion. And because our God sent his Son to abide among us, to bear our sorrows and griefs and sins and burdens, and die for us. And because our God has given us his Spirit, so we wouldn't have to spend 103,696 weeks just sleeping on the ground. Rather, we could spend this time anticipating the feast and inviting others.

Today's gospel and those on the next two Sundays are quite similar. They are all about waiting and anticipating. Not being there yet, but remaining hopeful. Because we are looking for a particular result. A singular, distinctive outcome to the history of the world, and to our own life.

I am reminded of so many other ways the Scriptures tell us this single, most important message: You are God's children. You should remain faithful to that God even when it no longer seems like the best option. There will be intermediate-range solutions to our presenting problems. People will propose that we just focus on their priorities, adopt their agendas, and all will be well. But you are not on their accounts to give up the faith you have, that your God will deliver you in the end. Do not abjure the true God because you gotta do what you gotta do, or because you have your own personal goals which are more important. Nothing is more important, more salient, more crucial than this: The will of the God of love is for all of us to love one another.

This Sunday and the next two are about results. Ends. What drives the people of God. What keeps us faithful. And that will not change.

If you want to break it down into components, it is the Lord's Prayer. The Day of the Lord is the day we can stop praying the Lord's Prayer, because it will have come true. Is that today? Will it be tomorrow? Not jolly likely. So we keep orienting our lives to this end, this result: that our God's name will be hallowed, his kingdom come, his will be done on earth as it is in heaven; so that all peoples will enjoy a feast of rich food, the disgrace of all people will be taken away, and the sheet that is spread over all nations, death, will be destroyed.

Until then, Jesus tells us, keep a little oil handy. You don't know how long this may take. And you want to be ready to attend the "Amen party."

I remember driving home once on I-65, coming south from Chicago, at night in blinding rain. Traffic was slowed to a crawl. We were behind a semi, and I was trusting that truck to guide me home. Which meant that, at one point, I wound up at a stop sign. On the interstate? Because I had blindly followed the truck up an off-ramp!

Jesus took pains to warn his disciples, especially in the gospel of Matthew, that many would come and try to lead them astray. They would suffer; they would suffer for righteousness' sake, even! But they were not to turn aside from following him on the path he laid out before them, no matter how long it took. If it felt like it was taking God a long time to arrive with the fullness of salvation in his hand, well, guess what, they were not to take an easy off-ramp towards some other sort of satisfying "happy" ending.

103,696 weeks is a long time to wait for a victory party. Jesus says it's coming. Keep praying the Lord's prayer. Keep the faith. Don't be fooled, don't sleep, don't stray. God is coming.

Amen.