

Neither the Day nor the Hour
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November 9, 2014

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

If you have ever worked retail, especially as a manager of any sort, few words send fear and trembling into your very soul like “visit from the regional manager.” You never knew quite when the boss was coming, intentionally, I’m quite sure, so your store had to be in its best shape semi-permanently and all the employees had to bring their ‘A’ game to their customer interactions, should they entertain not angels but regional managers unknowingly. The worry was always that something big would be found amiss, for which you would be accountable. Jesus as “regional manager” has been the way this parable has been told for a very long time. Be on your best behavior at all times for you don’t know when he might return – reminds me a bit of a jolly old soul who knows when you are sleeping and who knows when you’re awake. The apostle Paul encouraged followers who had become lax in the faith in a similar way.

Today, though, Paul writes to the people in Thessalonica (teh-suh-lo-NAI-kuh) not because they are getting lazy but because they are worried. They had thought Jesus’ return was imminent and they worry because some of their own have died and Christ has not yet come. They, too, anxiously await Jesus to arrive but for different reasons. For them and for the people to whom Matthew wrote, the time of waiting was filled with uncertainty. Paul aims to reassure the Thessalonians that even those who have died will share in Christ’s return so they need not be troubled. His message is pretty straightforward.

And then we come to Jesus through Matthew. Not surprisingly, as a parable, the meaning is a little, or a lot, muddy to his followers, us included. As I said, the idea of Jesus as “regional manager” has been our way of understanding his message for a long time. Professor Mark Douglas convincingly notes that we have tended to simplify the meaning of Jesus’ words. In particular, he points out two crucial misunderstandings. He says, “The theological core of this text does not revolve around the apprehensive and superhuman project of maintaining a state of constant vigilance and does not promote the attendant and superhuman orientation of works righteousness such a project would entail.”¹ In simpler terms, our notion that those very prepared bridesmaids, with their extra oil, were the “right” ones and that all it takes to be let into heaven is to always be prepared, always be ready is mistaken. He

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 284/6.

explains, “It cannot be that we are all supposed to bring with us the resources necessary for the celebration: while not all of them got in, all ten virgins bring only lamps with oil in them.”² He means they did not come with everything needed for the celebration, like food and wine. To have everything needed to receive the bridegroom would have been superhuman, the list impossible to apprehend and that is not what is asked of us.

The second misunderstanding is this: “The theological center of this text does not orient itself around the all-too-easy confidence of knowing the bridegroom; it does nothing to promote the all-too-common project of attempting to distinguish between insiders and outsiders on the basis of their self-confessed knowledge of the host.”³ He explains, “The only difference between the wise and the foolish virgins is this: the wise virgins are prepared for the wait and therefore bring extra oil.”⁴ What Douglas is arguing is that this parable is not about who is the most ready or who actually knows Christ.

Pastor John Buchanan, whom some of you met when he spoke at Avalon Square last year, continues in the idea of being prepared for the wait. He writes, “The early Christians had to adjust to the reality that Jesus did not return as they fully expected, and that their mission was to wait expectantly and in the meantime live faithfully, courageously, hopefully.”⁵ This is our mission, too – not to focus on when Jesus will return in judgment but to live well as we wait. What characterizes a Christian life of waiting? Hope. The same hope which Paul was trying to instill, or re-instill, in the Thessalonians. Paul wasn’t denying that there were difficult days, that there was grief, and Buchanan agrees. He writes, “Living in hope does not mean immunity to the harsh realities of history.” He continues, “On the contrary, it means living confidently and expectantly, trusting that the Lord of history continues to come into life with compassion and redemption and hope.”⁶

We speak more frequently of the Jesus who continues to come into our lives, through others, through our sharing in communion, through our seeking him. This type of anticipation feels like doing something to which we are accustomed. Less frequently do we speak of how to wait – a natural effect of being so far removed in time from the time when Christ first came and a natural effect of our culture of productivity. Our readings today urge us to remember that we are also waiting just as much as the first followers. If we have false confidence in what it means to be ready for the bridegroom, we believe we can “do” to be ready. Professor Douglas offers this caution: “While it is wise to fill our lamps with good things, we should remember that those things are for use this side of eternity.”⁷ Of course, doing

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 286.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 288.

⁷ *Ibid.*

good in the name of Christ matters but Douglas reminds, “that knowledge, faith, and love are tools for living in the time before eternity, not tools to gain entrance into it.”⁸

Our readings today urge us to remember to be in holy waiting, not to do holy waiting but to be immersed in it. Just as prayer is equally our speaking to God and our listening for God’s reply, believing in a Christ who is already and not yet here involves both doing and being, working and waiting. The being and the waiting are not my strongest nor most comfortable ways. I need today’s reminder as much as the next person. And in my “doing” way of thought, I wish for a checklist to tell me how to be, how to wait. In my desire to have answers for you, I want to be able to give that checklist to you. The best guide I can offer comes from the gospel of Luke. “Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”⁹ May we all live into more Mary moments as we wait.

Let us pray: Holy God, help us to remember to live with hope and with eager anticipation. Amen.

⁸ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 288.

⁹ Luke 10:38-42.