

## **Sermon: While We Wait**

11/29/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading, like so many over the past few months, begins with Jesus teaching in the Temple. At this point, the conflict between Jesus and Jerusalem's religious leaders was escalating and nearing its end. Jesus had been sharp, pointed, and persistent in his recent criticism of the Pharisees and the chief priest, accusing them of being hypocrites and blind guides. His teachings were also becoming more apocalyptic, with frequent references to his second coming and the end of times. As you might imagine, given all that was going on, tensions were high and people were becoming unnerved as they witnessed Jesus challenge the stable structures of their religious life, some of which were beginning to crumble. So they went to Jesus with a profound question, one which had been asked many times before and one which has been asked many times since. When? When will this chaos end and when will God finally make the world right?

That day in the Temple, there were surely those among the crowd who went to Jesus seeking a reassuring word. They hoped that Jesus would tell them that the coming of the Son of Man was at hand and that the world had reached the day where it would finally and completely be redeemed. But Jesus, as we heard in our Gospel lesson, did not know the answer to their question. "There is only one person who knows the answer," Jesus declares, "God the Father, and the Father is not telling. No, the coming of the Son of Man will be a surprise, just like the flood was in the days of Noah. Remember, apart from Noah and his family, no one knew that the flood was coming. There were no hurricane warnings or evacuation notices. People were just going about their ordinary lives, working in their fields and in the market square, gathering with

family and talking with friends, when it began to rain and the water levels began to rise. That is what the coming of the Son of Man will be like.” Five times in five verses, we hear Jesus tell those gathered that no one but the Father knows the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come. “But don’t lose hope,” Jesus goes on to say, “for the Son of Man is coming, so make sure and prepare yourselves while you’re waiting.”

If there is anything that the last nine months have shown us, it’s that waiting isn’t easy. Day after day, month after month, we’ve been left waiting for the day when this pandemic will finally be over. We’ve been left waiting for the day when we will no longer need to wear masks, when we can give hugs to friends and family without a second thought, when holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas are joyous affairs rather than reminders of all we’re missing, and when we can gather once more in our church building for worship and for fellowship. No, waiting isn’t easy, especially when we’re waiting on something so important. Take the recent vaccines, for example. My guess is that I’m not the only one wondering how long it will be until I can get one. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad that those at highest risk and our healthcare professionals will have first access. That’s how it should be. It’s the right thing to do. But how long will I have to wait, and how long will those I care about have to wait? How long until our lives can finally begin to return to normal? Will it be by Easter or the Fourth of July? And what if the vaccines are not as effective as the trials suggest, and next fall is just as dark and dreary as this one? I’m already tired and tired of waiting. How much longer can I honestly wait?

As Jesus stood there, he must have known that the day would soon come when his disciples would be asking themselves these same types of questions. Questions like, how long will we have to wait until the Son of Man returns? Will it be a few weeks or a few months? As the years passed, they began to question if Jesus would even come back during their lifetimes, a

testament to just how difficult waiting can be. And so, Jesus sought to prepare them by teaching about the importance of being ready and watchful; a message just as important for us gathered here today as it was for them back then.

“As you wait on my return,” Jesus tell them, “be like a homeowner who stays awake protecting your house from thieves.” Now, the protection that Jesus speaks of here is more than just remembering to lock the door, or turn on the porch light, or set the alarm. We are supposed to watch and wait for the unexpected while listening carefully for any strange noises. It is mindfulness multiplied. It is the suspense of waiting for the other shoe to drop. It means sleepless nights, something that every parent is well-acquainted with. Now, I must admit, this may seem like a recipe for anxiety and eventual burnout: the constant watching, and waiting, and worrying without knowing when or what to expect. And I would be lying if the thought of burnout has not crossed my mind in recent months, given the stress associated with trying to make it from day to day right now. But Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew not to worry, for God will provide us with everything we need: food, water, shelter, clothes, and the strength to carry on. We need not worry, if we have first dedicated our lives to following God.

Over the last month, we’ve read and reflected on the parables just after today’s Gospel lesson. We’ve heard the story of how five “wise” bridesmaids remembered to bring oil for their lamps and were prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom, while five “foolish” bridesmaids had to travel to the store to buy more, leading them to miss the wedding. We’ve heard of the slaves who were given talents by their master, and how their master upon his return blessed those who used them wisely, while punishing the one who buried his in the ground. And we’ve heard of how the Son of Man will one day gather everyone around himself and separate us into groups based on how we’ve treated one another, the way a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Among the many things that unite these parables is that they each speak of people going about their ordinary, day-to-day lives. People like those living during the days of Noah, in their fields and market square. People like us, doing things like preparing for weddings and running households. People who are waiting, and who in the midst of their waiting, reveal the depths of their faith.

In short, what we hear in these parables and in today's Gospel lesson is that, while we're waiting, God has called us to be ready and watchful, to use the talents we've been given, and to seek to make a difference in the lives of those around us. We've been called to be like the man who patiently cares for his wife with Alzheimer's while maintaining a full-time job, all with a degree of patience and love that is admirable. Or like the woman who shows up each and every day to attend to a laboratory experiment, until all her leads have been followed and her research is complete. We've been called to be people whose ordinary, day-to-day lives reflect who we are and to whom we belong; people who do these things, not because we desire notoriety or to earn our salvation, but because they are, quite simply, the right thing to do.

A little over four years ago, a man named Robert Borba was running an errand at his local Walmart. In the process of that shopping trip, he heard a woman yelling "Stop him! Stop him! He stole my bike!" Borba looked up and saw a man riding away on a bicycle, so he did what he does every day. Because he works at a ranch in Oregon and had ridden his horse, Long John, to Walmart, he took off on horseback after the bike thief, lassoed him, and tied him to a tree. He then called 911 so that the police would come; as you might imagine, the dispatcher was surprised to the point of unbelief. When interviewed about his actions, Borba simply responded that he wanted to do the right thing and needed no attention. He did, however, ask for his rope back.

None of us know what a particular day will bring. This last year is a testament to just how quickly things can change. Each day and season of our lives may unfold in predictable ways, or it may be filled with chaos and the unexpected. But we do know that as we wait we are called to be faithful, steadfast, and loving. And we know one more thing: that the Son of Man is coming. There may be questions about when Jesus will come again, but there is no uncertainty about if he will. And there may be questions about what will happen when he arrives, but we can rest assured that the future belongs to God and that God is not done with us yet; God is not done with us as individuals, as a church, and as a society. More is yet to come and because it is from God, we know that it will be good. So during this Advent season, as we wait for Christmas, let's strive each and every day be ready and keep watch, not just for the birth of the Son of Man, but for his second coming as well. Amen.