

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
November 11-12, 2017
Matthew 25:1-13

“Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Expectantly”

Waiting... it's something that most of us consider a waste of time. But we do a lot of it, don't we? We wait in traffic. We wait in line at the store to check out. We wait for the meeting to start. We wait for the test results to come back. We wait for the medical procedure. We wait. Today's Gospel lesson is all about waiting with Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins. In our 24/7 wi-fi connected lives where any waiting, any delay, is viewed as a problem, how do we understand Jesus' parable? And what is the meaning of this for us today? For the remaining weekends in November, the sermons will be based on the appointed Gospel lessons (all from Jesus' words in Matthew 25) under the theme "Waiting for the Kingdom." Beginning with the festival of All Saints (November 4-5), the mood of worship this month points us to watchful waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. This sermon series will culminate with the final Sunday of the church year, the festival of Christ the King (November 25-26). I am indebted to Dr. Harry Wendt, author of *Crossways!* Bible study materials, for his insights here, and from whom I have borrowed these sermon themes. They include "Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Expectantly" for today (November 11-12), based on Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins; "Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Responsibly" (November 18-19), based on Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus' parable of the talents; and "Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Compassionately" (November 25-26), based on Matthew 25:31-46, the final judgment. We begin this series today with "Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Expectantly." May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of His Word for Jesus' sake.

In the midst of the trying and uncertain times in which we live, with ever more senseless acts of violence all around us, it would be very easy to see only doom and gloom. One horrific shooting is eclipsed by yet another. One week ago at Sunderland Springs Baptist Church in Texas, twenty-six members of this congregation were killed by a gunman. Among these were eight members of the visiting pastor's family, spanning three generations, including the pastor himself. We shake our heads and wonder where is God in all of this? How long are we supposed to wait until things get better? How do we live expectantly? The good news is that the kingdom, the rule and reign of God, has broken into this sorry and messed up world that we call home. That kingdom, that rule and reign, centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we understand that God is for us, not against us (Romans 8:31), and that Jesus has paid the price for our sin and disobedience. In Jesus, our future is secure, come what may. Edmund Steimle (1907-1988) was a Lutheran pastor and seminary professor who wrote: "... if we in the church are going to be heard by those outside the church, we'd better make it crystal clear that our faith includes our experiences of God absent as well as present; that we know, as they do, what it means to live in a world which gives precious little evidence of the presence or reality of God. Maybe then they'll listen to us for a change... To be sure, we ought to be on the *qui vive* [alert] lest his coming, like a thief in the night, 'catch us unawares.' But we will miss any coming, any visitation, any assurance, of his presence, any heavenly banquet, if we are not first prepared for the delay, for his absence. The unfaithful ones in the parable were ready for a 'coming' but not for a delay, and for those unfaithful ones, there was no coming at all, no visitation. The door was shut. 'I do not know you'" (*From Death to Birth*, by Edmund A. Steimle, as contained in *For All the Saints: A Prayer Book For and By the Church*, Vol. III, p. 88).

In weddings of Jesus' day in first-century Palestine, the focus was not on the bride, but the bridegroom. It was the groom who footed the bill for the wedding. It was the groom's occasion to show off for his family and friends, and the entire wedding was done on his terms. Following the wedding ceremony itself, the bridesmaids (virgins) departed with their small, clay hand-held oil lamps and went with the bride to the bride's home where the groom would meet and escort his bride to his parents' home. There was watchful waiting for the groom's arrival. Living expectantly in the midst of difficult times that "try men's souls" isn't easy, but we aren't the first people to do this. The hymn of the day that we'll sing on Sunday morning was written in such a time. The writer of the both the text and tune was a German Lutheran pastor, Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608). He lived in the first generation

after Luther, graduated from the University of Wittenberg where Luther himself taught, and then served in ministry in various places. All this occurred at a time when religious conflict raged between Lutherans, Catholics, and Calvinists. Germany was the battleground as warring troops from all over Europe converged here, and with war famine and disease are not far behind. Philipp Nicolai was called to serve as pastor in Unna in Westphalia in 1596, and the following year in 1597 the plague struck, claiming some 1300 of his parishioners, including 170 in one week. "To comfort his parishioners, he wrote a series of meditations which he called *Freudenspiegel* (Mirror of Joy), and to this he appended two hymns, both of which have become world-famous: "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying" (Lutheran Book of Worship 31) and "O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright" (Lutheran Book of Worship 76). We still sing these hymns in worship today (<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/12.html>; *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981; pp. 131-132). "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying" is based on Jesus' parable in today's Gospel lesson, as well as other passages from Scripture (Revelation 19:6-9, 21:21; 1 Corinthians 2:9; Ezekiel 3:17; Isaiah 3:8):

*"Wake, awake, for night is flying,"
the watchmen on the heights are crying;
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
Midnight hears the welcome voices
And at the thrilling cry rejoices:
"Oh, where are ye, ye virgins wise?
The Bridegroom comes, awake!
Your lamps with gladness take!
Alleluia! With bridal care yourselves prepare
To meet the Bridegroom, who is near (Lutheran Service Book 516, stanza 1).*

In the midst of a world that seems like it's going from bad to worse, where sin and evil seem to have the upper hand and where goodness and righteousness seem to be on the verge of extinction, God's people cry out: "**Come, Lord Jesus!**" (Revelation 22:20). Why does Jesus delay his promised coming? The more we go along in life, the more we think about this. The answer to this question is rooted in God's love and concern for us as we read in Scripture: "**But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance**" (2 Peter 3:8-9). So let us now, while there is time, turn to the Lord with repentant hearts.

Living expectantly means that we are in this world, but of this world (John 17:14). We have one foot here in time, but another in eternity. In joyful expectation of the return of Jesus, who loves us and gave his life for us, we live in a state of readiness for that blessed day, doing on earth those things which prepare us for heaven. We look ahead to what is yet to be revealed as Paul tells us in today's Epistle lesson (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18): "**For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.**" And that is our calling now as we wait for the full revelation of the kingdom of God when Christ will come again: to encourage one another in faith. In Jesus, we know that the day of the Lord will bring about the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan and purpose for all of creation that centers in Jesus Christ. For the child of God, this is not a day of darkness and destruction, but it is a day of light and joy because our Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ, is coming to take his Bride, the Church, home to be with him forever. And so we pray: Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.