

# While we are Waiting

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November 9, 2008 | Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 27)

## Lectionary citations

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 with Psalm 78:1-7

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

*At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. (Matthew 25:1-5)*

This weekend my friend Michelle took me to meet some of her family in the Arthur Illinois area. Arthur is the center of an area of Amish settlement and the Amish are very visible in town with their traditional dress and their horse drawn buggies. Many Amish continue to farm, but Michelle tells me that many have started a variety of businesses. The Amish have a distinct way of life, but after spending a day in Arthur, it is clear that they are not isolated from the broader community, especially from the local and national economy.

The Amish are a Christian community that have settled on particular way of life, which for them answers the question raised by today's Epistle and Gospel readings: "How do we live as Christians until Christ comes again?" Obviously, the solutions they have adopted are not for everyone. Michelle's father's family chose to leave the Amish community and join the mainstream of American life. The Amish settlement was founded in 1865 by a handful of families and has grown to around 4,500 members, but is still quite small compared to the "English" communities that surround them. Arthur also has many Mennonite families, who have chosen what could be called a middle way between the strictness of Amish life and the worldliness of mainstream America.

The Epistle and Gospel readings for today deal with the second coming of Christ, when "Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead." The Epistle passage has been one of the foundation scriptures for the rapture, a concept popularized in the "Left Behind" books. By combining Paul's description of "meeting Christ in the air" with the Book of Revelation, some Christians have developed an exciting, colorful, and often frightening account of the final days of this world. Nevertheless, regardless of the details, it is clearly a fundamental tenant of traditional Christianity that Christ will return to this earth in his resurrected body and that the living and the dead will stand before him in the flesh to receive his judgment. Those that pass judgment will live forever with Christ in a new heaven and a new earth.

It is important to note that this promise of the end times is that we will be with Christ as living beings—not spirits, or ghosts, or immortal souls. Our bodies will be transformed, but they will be bodies. Moreover, Christ will not come to us as a spirit, but just as he did after Easter, as a man in a body marked on his hands, feet, and side by his crucifixion. The Christian story is a story of incarnation:

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:14)*

All the interactions with Christ in the Bible are between Jesus—a living human being—and other living human beings. Remember what Jesus said about the resurrection in Matthew:

*“But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” (Matthew 22:31-32).*

In the drama of the Judgment Day, complete living human beings—not ghosts or spirits or disembodied souls—will play all the parts.

However, I am getting away from the main question I intended to deal with in this sermon: “How do we live as Christians until Christ comes again?” The Bible makes it clear that it is not for us to know the time of Christ’s coming again. It is also clear that from our point of view that Christ’s coming has been delayed, although we have no basis for thinking that any delay has occurred from God’s point of view. Because the resurrection is delayed to an unknown future, a future that seems likely to be somewhere long after the end of the lives all those living today, it is easy to see how the resurrection might not seem relevant to how we live today or even to how we face the deaths of ourselves and those we love. Yet, the resurrection is clearly a fundamental part of the Good News that Jesus brings to us. How does the Good News of the resurrection shape how we live as Christians today?

The Amish are a community of people whose daily lives are shaped by a particular interpretation of the Gospel. “The tradition-minded or Old Order Amish rejected industrial society and opted for simplicity, nonconformity, nonresistance, and nonviolence. Today their lifestyle continues to include German-language worship services, horse-drawn transportation, face-to-face business and social interactions, and no established church bureaucracy (Hostetler 1992, 6, 25).”

I think it would be important and valuable for us, as individuals and as a congregation, to ask how our daily lives are shaped by our interpretation of the Gospel. The challenge is to live in a way fundamentally shaped by the Gospel, rather than fundamentally secular and worldly lives that are merely flavored or sweetened a bit by a touch of Christianity. Of course as “English,” we do not have a set of rules for daily living designed to conform our lives to Christ’s image. This was the same problem faced by the Gentiles of Paul’s churches, who were trying to live Christian lives without relying on the 613 laws of the Jewish Torah. The challenge for us is to worship God not only on Sunday in Spirit and in Truth, but to live our daily lives in the same Spirit and Truth. How can we do this?

Fortunately, Jesus gave us plenty to work with in his parables on the Kingdom of God. Anywhere Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is like...” you can bet that he is not only telling us something about the

promised Kingdom. He is also telling us how we should live today in the light of that Kingdom. Jesus emphasized the continuity between our daily life in the world and our future life in the Kingdom. The Kingdom life is a transformed and glorified life, but it continues the life we are living today.

Living for the Kingdom is like living for any other goal or destination. If we seek a career in the future, we go to school today to prepare ourselves. If we want to run a race or ride a long distance on our bike, we start training today. In the same way if we want a life in the Kingdom of God, we need to start preparing ourselves for that life today. Are the ways we are using our time, energy, and talents preparing us for the Kingdom? Are the ways we are treating those around us and treating ourselves, preparing us to live forever with Christ?

Today's Gospel gives us some of the markers of the life that is a preparation for the Kingdom. It is a life lived in anticipation and hope. It is a life lived in joy and celebration for we know that Jesus is coming soon. A life that includes the work of preparation, but which also has time for rest. It is a life of care and watchfulness. It is a life of prudence, planning, and good stewardship. It is a life lived in a community of believers, but it also a life where each individual is responsible for their own response to Christ.

The Kingdom life is a life focused on our relationship with Christ, a relationship where he is lovingly in charge. The parable gives Christ, the bridegroom, the exclusive right of judgment, the right to distinguish between the wise and the foolish. Since he has authority to save, he also has authority to condemn. A life lived in preparation for the Kingdom is a life that accepts Christ unconditionally as Lord as well as Savior. He is in charge. The softhearted may object to the harshness of the parable—the wise bridesmaids will not share their oil with the foolish, and the Bridegroom will not open the door for the foolish even when they cry out, "Lord, lord, open to us." If God freely gives salvation through grace, shouldn't God save the foolish in the end? I believe the foolish virgins would be saved if they had truly repented and asked for forgiveness, rather than simply making unreasonable and loud demands.

To me, the lamps with their perishable wicks and precious oil remind me of God's great gift he has made to each of us—the gift of our selves. God made us in his image as embodied, incarnated beings. He has give us the gift of our selves—mind, body, and spirit. God created each of us in his image, yet also unique and individual. God has given us a potential that we can choose to fulfill or waste. I believe what God said to the prophet Jeremiah applies to all of us:

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart. (Jeremiah 1:5)*

Each of us was set apart for a purpose to God's glory. If we are wise, we will carefully and lovingly use all that God has given us to make ourselves ready for the day in our lives when we see our savior face to face. Amen.

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