

<i>Date Preached</i>	08-Nov-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	27-Oct-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Yr A, Pr 27 (Tr 2)

" ... [Jesus] came into the world that he might ... make us children of God and heirs of eternal life:
... having this hope, we ... "



"Waiting room." "Wait list." "We are"—as always, it seems—"experiencing higher-than-average call volume, and your estimated wait time is approximately fifteen-to-eighteen minutes." These are words we hear again and again in our daily lives, and if I am candid, I don't react particularly well to them. As minutes stretch into bigger and bigger chunks of an hour while I am waiting at the DMV or the doctor's office, I keep thinking about everything *else* I could be doing right now, instead of being held in some sort of bureaucratic limbo. I sometimes find myself seething as I wait to speak to an actual person on the phone: not just because of the awful canned music—usually on an all-too-short loop—but also at the company's refusal to staff enough people in its call center to accommodate the volume of calls it *knows* it will receive. Perhaps worst of all, for me, is waiting in a traffic jam: the uncertainty of what's causing the delay, how long it will last, whether or not I should get off at the next exit ... or will doing that take me even longer than just waiting? There is a certain powerlessness or helplessness—victimhood, I sometimes think in my more histrionic moments—bound up in waiting.

Anticipation, on the other hand, is waiting's more active, more constructive cousin. As we make plans for our next vacation—choosing a destination; researching possible accommodations and activities; weighing our options for transportation, dining and the like—it's almost like we've already begun the trip. Or, as the clock ticks closer and closer to the hour when the family members we haven't seen in forever are due to arrive, our excitement and eagerness grow. As we start smelling the stew in the pot or the cake in the oven, our mouths begin to water a bit, and we look forward to some good eating. If waiting is passive endurance of *whenever*, anticipating is active engagement with *almost-but-not-yet*. The random open-endedness of waiting often induces anxiety, fear or anger, while the focused hopefulness of anticipation brings about joy and enthusiasm.

This distinction is one that St Paul is trying to bridge in his words to the Thessalonians today. Believing, as did almost all members of the very early Church, that Jesus' return would be taking place just about any time now, their joyful anticipation of that great day has begun to slip into stressful waiting: What about our loved ones who have already died? Will they *miss* Him? Might He forget them? Should we be doing something to make sure they get saved? Paul provides a theologically satisfying, beautifully-imagined answer. But then he tacks on a request to "encourage one another" with what he's told them ... as if what he's written isn't compelling enough without a little boost. I wonder whether Paul knows that some of his correspondents have slid from the assured flow of anticipation into the wan ebb of waiting.

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Whether it is Jesus' reappearance on earth, in triumph, or the inbound aircraft's arrival from Cleveland to carry us on our way to Miami, there is often very little we can do to affect or

hasten the actual occurrence of some future event. But very often, we *can* choose whether the time *between* now and then will be filled with passive, enervating waiting or more hopeful and sustaining anticipation. This is exactly Jesus' point today in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins—that's the literal translation of the Greek, by the way, although no part of Jesus' message turns on these women's sexual histories. Jewish wedding rituals at this time included the bridegroom's ceremonial return to his own home, either with his dowry or with the new bride, for a great celebration. For whatever reason, the bridegroom in Jesus' parable is much delayed, and as the night drags on, the oil fueling the women's rag lamps begins to run out. Some of them have planned ahead and brought extra oil with them, but others have not and now are running low. While they dash to the Patco to try to buy more, the bridegroom arrives, the doors are locked, and the banquet begins ... without them. These women were every bit as *invited* to the banquet as those who got in, but their failure to foresee—to engage ... to *anticipate* what they might need to do—left them outside in the dark.

We read this lesson today because, as the Church's liturgical cycle begins to turn toward Advent—to the coming of Christ, in glory—we begin to take up Jesus' teachings about the end times—what the Church has traditionally termed "the four last things": death, judgment, heaven and hell. I don't want to take us in a narrow eschatological direction this morning, however (and I can almost feel your relief!), for what speaks to me in this passage today ... in *this* particular time ... is a broader, more over-arching message. We who, through the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, have been assured salvation and eternal life ... are meant not simply to wait for them, but to *anticipate* them.

Merely waiting for Christ's promises to be fulfilled means crossing off another box on the calendar each night with a sigh: The End (capital *T* and *E*) didn't happen again today, and now we've got to get up tomorrow and somehow slog through another day. Such a mindset reduces this world to Heaven's waiting room, as we bide our time ... enduring the seemingly arbitrary indignities of our human condition ... until one day we are suddenly freed from them. Passive waiting leaves it up to *God* to provide all the joy ... all the hope ... all the energy of our faith. It makes the assumption, as the foolish women did, that the bridegroom will arrive before whatever we just happen to have on hand ... in terms of our passion or delight or quest ... runs dry and our lamp goes out.

To the contrary, says Jesus, you all have it within you to *anticipate* My coming to you—to lay in a supply of oil that will last you the entire night that is your life on earth. Although that oil does include discipleship—worship, prayer, love of God and other, stewardship, repentance—I think its *most essential* ingredient ... and one we must provide for ourselves; that we cannot borrow from our neighbor or purchase from a dealer ... is *hope*: is the conviction, to the very core of our being and the very ends of our thoughts ... that this world ... *as we perceive it ... is not all there is*. That God has in store for us ... *now* ... a forever place at the banquet table of Christ. [¶] Christian hope is the paradoxical ability, through faith, to hold in mind the unsurpassable goodness of eternity amidst the unmitigated dreck this world so often throws at us. Our being admitted to that banquet will not, retrospectively, somehow suddenly make sense of this life. Rather, its infinity will render the problems of this life infinitesimal within the compass of our existence in God. Taking our seat at that eternal meal will not suddenly salve every wound we've ever suffered, but will show us that, on account of the saving wounds Jesus suffered, our earthly wounds were never capable of doing us any lasting harm.

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The difference between waiting and anticipating is not that in the former the negatives of this life are sharp and painful and in the latter they aren't. There is no getting around the fact that because this world is not yet the perfection God intends for us and for all, it hurts and stings; it disappoints and betrays.

Rather, the difference is between the worry of waiting and the knowledge of anticipation. If we merely wait for Christ to come and make everything right, we live in perceived separation from Him. We dwell upon what seems to have gone wrong ... to be afflicting us ... to have no solution: If ~only~ But if we *anticipate* Christ's presence with us, we come to see that it already exists: that Christ is here, in all the hurts and set-backs of life, right alongside us ... and all we're *really* awaiting is the ability to see this more clearly.

If we passively take every challenge or upset or sorrow as diminishment, our lamp of hope is liable to run dry with hours to go before daybreak. But if, as Jesus encourages, we meet the night of life's disappointments and unfairnesses with a full supply of confidence in Christ ... with the knowledge that He already exists in our time and we in His ... we are admitted to the banquet before it even begins, seated right next to the Host Himself.



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