

THE WAITING THAT LEADS TO WONDER: HOPE

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Reading: Matthew 24:36-44

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

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It was incredibly difficult to be alive in the first century of the common era, living on the edges of the Roman Empire, in the province of Palestine. For most of that first century, the people, specifically the Jewish people, were stuck in the middle of two concentric iron grips. Not only were they squeezed by the greed and glory-pursuit of King Herod and later his feuding sons, but they were also held firmly under the boot of a Roman Empire that was trying to solidify its control on its eastern holdings. In the decades after the Romans crucified Jesus in Jerusalem, there was great unrest. The people were starving, powerless, and oppressed. Feeling they had nothing to lose they began to fight against the Empires that squeezed them. Beginning in the year 66, the Jewish people rose up against the oppressive power structure. It was a time of great unrest and fear and violence. There was fighting against Romans, fighting against Jewish elites, fighting between different factions all desperate for something better than they currently had. The response to this by the Romans was destruction. They sieged the city, and when they finally broke through the walls they destroyed everything. The Temple was demolished and all of their sacred objects were stolen back to Rome. Tens of thousands of people—perhaps hundreds of thousands—from all sides were killed. The Romans tightened their stranglehold grip beyond measure. Everything was lost. Everything. Jewish religion, society, and culture would never be the same again. The city of Jerusalem was razed to the ground and the Romans did everything in their power to erase the very history of the city and its people. For those who had no choice but to remain, the losses were staggering. Everything they knew and understood had been destroyed, and they were still worse off than they were before.

This is the context of this passage from the Book of Matthew today. Matthew was written some time in the decades after the destruction of Jerusalem and its sacred spaces. The writers of this Gospel were looking back before all the devastation to the life and death of Jesus and trying to make meaning out of his teachings. Jesus had lived and preached, had taught and modeled what it looked like to live with God's abundant love as the center of relationships and society. And then he was killed and things had gotten worse. They wanted him back. They wanted to be released from the pain and agony of Roman subjugation and into the loving embrace of the Kin(g)dom of God. They were backed into a corner and dreamed of any way out of their misery.

And this story is how we begin Advent this year! Welcome to Advent, friends! Remember, Advent is not Christmas. Advent is the time of waiting, of expectation, of anticipation. And while we are waiting together, we may not get what we expect . . . like this passage, for example. It is not the way that we culturally approach the Christmas season. Yet, in a time of waiting, we do not get to decide what may arrive and demand our attention and response.

Typically, apocalyptic texts like this do not hold a lot of meaning for me. I don't know what to do with them. I spent this last week perseverating on this passage, spinning my wheels, wondering how on earth I was going to stand here today and engage with you all. Placing it in context helped me a lot. Understanding the deep oppression, destruction and loss that surrounds this writing helped me have compassion with the story and not just try to reject it outright.

When we people are suffering, we will grab onto anything that may help us. Like the old saying goes, to a drowning person everything is a lifesaver. The audience of the Book of Matthew were drowning and nothing was coming to save them, so they put all of their hopes into the miraculous idea that the Son of Man would return and this time he would return triumphant and make everything better. He would upend the systems of oppression that had them by the throats and allow them to finally breathe again. The return of the Son of Man would be a restart, like the great flood, and those faithful followers of Jesus would be saved like Noah on the Ark.

They waited for it. And waited. And waited. Jesus never did return in the way that they had hoped. The Son of Man didn't fix everything or take away some people and leave others in place. The apocalypse did not occur, and entire lives were spent waiting and waiting and waiting for a return that has not happened. As the writers of the Book of Matthew say here, we will not know when this waiting will be over. If we knew when it was going to occur, we could stay awake for it, but it is unknown to everyone and the waiting must continue.

Waiting, though, is not an empty time. Waiting is not idleness. Waiting can be an active experience. In this story, the examples of waiting are not just active, but they are lifegiving! Some people are described in their waiting as working in a field. To plant, grow, and harvest is a life-producing activity. The others are described as grinding grain together for the benefit of feeding themselves and others.

Actively waiting can be a time of great hope. To wait for something better, to wait for a new situation is to live in hopefulness. Even in the midst of great suffering hope can be found. In fact, hope is probably most active in the darkest of times. It is hope that keeps us going when the weight of our situation is too heavy. Hope holds that tomorrow could be better than today. For the drowning person, hope is that the next object grabbed onto will be the one that saves. For the followers of Jesus in the first century, hope was that a supernatural end was coming soon. Hope need not be realized in order to be lifegiving. As the great Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness. Agreeing, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh said: "Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today."

God's promise to us is not that everything will be good or easy or fair. God's promise is that something better is always possible. Hope is always possible if we are willing to seek it. And it might not be found where we look for it, or it will show up in ways that are unexpected. And that is the root of Advent. Hope will arrive, but not as a king or a warrior or as the Son of Man to overturn the power structure. Instead hope will arrive as a baby, a baby born in poverty, without a home, to young parents with an unbelievable story. Jesus did not return in the way described in this reading today, but Jesus does return every single year as the still unexpected baby.

And every year we get to re-experience the waiting that gently holds the hope. Every year we receive the gift again of getting to make or find hope in the unanticipated places. And like the people in the story, we can actively wait while doing lifegiving things like planting and harvesting or feeding each other. For it

seems that there will always be suffering. There will always be people and systems that oppress, marginalize, and hurt other living things. There will always be some darkness. And yet in that darkness we have the opportunity to wait and to wait actively while taking care of each other. Our waiting doesn't have to be empty, rather it can be filled with hope for a better day and active in the ways that we care for one another.

Our Advent theme this year is *The Waiting That Leads to Wonder*, and it is your clergy's intention to help us all participate in the act of waiting that is central to Advent. It is our desire to illuminate the idea that this waiting can lead to wonder. The forthcoming birth of the baby Jesus, the manifestation of love and possibilities in our midst, is a moment of wonder.

So, friends, let us wait together. Let us wait in active ways, planting seeds and feeding one another. Let us wait in hope, not because there is no darkness but because we can see the suffering within and around us and still generate hope. Let us wait together. For Jesus will certainly return, not in the way that had been anticipated, but in the yearly reminder of the birth of a baby. Let us wait together.