

Message for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C (8/7/2022)  
Luke 12:32-40

Is there anything more aggravating than to prepare diligently for a trip only to be stranded in transit? You've planned for time away from your regular routine, carefully packed your bags, and arrived at your departure point well ahead of schedule, but inevitably your plane or train or bus is delayed, sometimes with no guarantee that it will ever leave. You've done everything in your power to make for a smooth journey; nevertheless, you find yourself at the mercy of other players, for whom the smoothness of your journey is not necessarily the highest priority. When it comes to travel, "hurry up and wait" is so often the name of the game.

And, doesn't that kind of waiting feel oppressive? In a culture of convenience and corresponding impatience, it can feel like an affliction to wait for anything. And, the high stakes of travel, either for work or play, can make that affliction feel more unbearable.

But, that's not how Jesus characterizes waiting in our Gospel from Luke today. "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit," he says, "be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks." *Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit*, that is, be prepared, so that you can... stay put and watch for your master's arrival.

That sounds a lot like "hurry up and wait" to me.

What are we to make of this teaching in a world that so often prioritizes action over contemplation, getting a move on over standing still, doing over being? If we're honest, we don't like to wait, even if it means the chance to bear witness to God's arrival in the world. We'd rather be active, wouldn't we? We'd rather keep busy because stopping to wait makes space for anxiety to set in, tearing the veil away from our illusion of control.

And, anxiety is just as prevalent in the church as it is elsewhere in our lives. Like other voluntary public associations – service clubs, scout troops, labor unions, bowling leagues – the church is in a time of institutional decline. On the whole, we're getting smaller and less influential. This is a sweeping cultural trend, so it's largely out of our control. But, since fewer and fewer people in the United States are affiliating with any religious tradition, let alone a particular congregation, churches can no longer assume that growth, or even stability – in terms of both membership and financial resources – is a given.

That causes me anxiety. Maybe it does you, too. What if we struggle to support our congregation's ministry into the future? What are we at risk of losing? How can we possibly survive? The response to concerns like these is rarely, "Wait and see what God will do," but more likely, "Do more yourselves." The antidote to our fears for the future, in other words, is to double down on what we've been doing in the church, regardless of whether or not it resonates with those who are already here or those who might be drawn to join us. The

threat of decline prompts us to try harder, do more, put ever more stock in our own agency.

But, Jesus invites us to look first to God's agency in the world: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." That is to say faithfulness is less about what we do for God than it is about what God does for us. If we are to be prepared as people of faith, if we are to "be dressed for action and have [our] lamps lit," it's only so that we might be receptive to what God is preparing for us: "Blessed are [they] whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them." To wait for the Lord, in other words, means to be ready for dinner, no matter the hour of the night.

From this perspective, waiting isn't equated with apathy or inaction. And, it's not just a "forced pause,"<sup>1</sup> like a travel delay, preventing us from accomplishing all that we might otherwise accomplish, either for God or for ourselves. Instead, waiting is an intentional way of being in the world, a spiritual posture that eagerly anticipates God's arrival among us with a feast of grace: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD / in the land of the living," the psalmist sings. "Wait for the LORD...!"<sup>2</sup>

Of course, God's feast of grace can't be hoarded, but only shared as widely as possible. That's the logic behind Jesus' command in today's Gospel: "Sell your

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age*, 158.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 27:13-14.

possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Since our treasure is God’s promised abundance, we wait for it not with closed fists, but “with eager and generous hearts.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s easy to become so preoccupied with doing, friends, that we miss out on the chance to truly be, that is, to wait expectantly for God to encounter us with grace. Still, that kind of attentiveness is fundamental to our calling as disciples of Jesus. “My deepest vocation,” writes Henri Nouwen “is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch.”

That’s why, for instance, confirmation students at Peace and their families take time at the beginning of every gathering for a practice we call “paying attention.” “Where did you see God since we last met?” we ask each other, then we discern together the ways that God may be showing up in our lives and the lives of the people around us. It’s not always clear, and sometimes God seems absent, but the practice of paying attention keeps us alert to the possibilities.

Friends, the Master is coming to find us, not only in the fullness of time but in each moment of our lives. And, faith is the discipline of waiting for the Lord to come knocking, not to measure our worthiness to receive him, but rather to feed us with good things. Wait with me, will you? It won’t be long.

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia J. Lull, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 336.