

Matthew 25:1-13  
November 8, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Waiting. It is not something I am particularly fond of or at times do well at. It seems like waiting fills much of our days right now. Waiting for election results to trickle in. Waiting for a vaccine. Waiting for the results of a COVID test. Waiting to go back to work after being laid off. Waiting to be free of the masks we wear. Waiting to sing again. Waiting to go back inside our beloved building. Waiting to gather with family and friends. Waiting for good news. Waiting for hope. So, when I saw this morning's gospel, my initial thoughts were something like, "You have got to be kidding me." We do not need a text about waiting when it seems that is all the world has been doing and will continue to do so for an unknown amount of time as it pertains to the global pandemic we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of. As positive cases skyrocket out of control with each new day, the likelihood of our waiting coming to an end anytime soon seems bleaker every day.

Yet, waiting is so often where we find ourselves; even, in the absence of a pandemic. I suspect there are moments when we all feel as if our lamps have run dry. Do we have enough oil to move forward? Will we run out? I have always wondered if there was not more to this text than might initially meet the eye? For instance, were these 5 women all that wise or did they fall into the trap they may not have enough so instead of sharing with their other sisters present they sought instead to preserve themselves first? And did the other 5 deemed foolish fall into the same trap thinking they did not have enough. So naturally the only thing to do was go buy some more. Were they too working from a model of scarcity?

Much ink has been put to paper attempting to make sense of this parable and just what this oil Jesus is referring to is. Martin Luther equated oil to faith. If that is the case, then I find much promise in this passage. We need not worry about running out of oil because the Spirit freely gives out all the oil we need. Faith is a gift and even when our perception might be that we do not have enough, we are assured God only needs the tiniest amount to do great things.

So, what does that mean for us? To me, that means in our waiting we can let go of so much. We can rest in the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Find peace knowing salvation is not ours to obtain through securing enough oil. God has provided the oil. Jesus has opened entry into the great feast to come to all through his death and resurrection. Yes, humanity can choose to reject that gift of grace; however, for those who walk as yet by faith our waiting need not be marked by living in fear of what is to come. We wait in the knowledge the best is yet to come. We wait safe and secure in the words of Easter. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

Much of my waiting tends to be marked by anxiety. I know I am not alone. Anxiety is a common reaction to the unknown and for some anxiety is something they can not escape for no fault of their own. The gift of medicines, various therapies and other means certainly can bring relief and the healing touch of God; yet, for some they may never truly escape the grip of anxiety. As one who has wrestled with anxiety and depression much of my adult life, I am highly sensitive to the fact statements such as, "Snap out of it" or "Don't worry" while well intentioned are not always that helpful and in some cases might actually have an adverse effect.

With that said, in my personal experience with anxiety, I have come to find great comfort and guidance through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, and through the word of God written in the Bible. For example, all we need to do is look at this morning's passages to find the help we need in our waiting, in remaining vigilant until Christ comes again.

The psalmist, who seems to be caught amidst his own precarious and unsettling momentary time of waiting turns to prayer as he opens, "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me!" It appears his life is very much in danger. No doubt his fear and anxiety are real. Yet, his relationship with God and his faith in a God who keeps God's promises moves him to confess "God is great!" It equips and enables him to rejoice and be glad in God for even though he is poor and need, God is his help and God is his deliverer.

Or let us turn to Paul's words to the Thessalonians waiting for what they thought was an imminent return of Jesus. Yet, when it did not happen and their brothers and sisters began to die, it appears their hopes began to wither. Anxiety began to escalate. Fear began to creep into the community. That is when Paul reminds them God is great. Their waiting is still one in which they are to rejoice and be glad, because they believe and rest in the good news that "Jesus died and rose again" and their brothers and sisters who have died in faith will also rise again and be with the Lord forever.

It is the assurance our lamps are full with all the oil we need and the hope that a new day, a better day, a day free of COVID-19, a day free of anxiety, fear, pain, loneliness, a day in which death will be no more – this assurance is what sustains us in our waiting. This is what leads us to rejoice and be glad. This is the day that the Lord has made. This is the fuel that helps us see Jesus is alive. Indeed, he will come again; but indeed, he is also here now. He is at work in each of us. He is at work in our congregation. Quilts continue to be made by the hands of many faithful women in our community delivering the comfort of Christ's love to others in their time of waiting. Many items of clothing have recently been delivered from our Hope Chest to bring warmth and the love of Christ to those who have received it. Bag after bag of food continues to be delivered to the pantry. At home kits for young children are bringing the love of Christ to many and the Spirit is abundantly overflowing their cups with the oil of faith to let their lights shine. The Spirit is pouring out the oil of faith in new ways, via Zoom meetings and online worship. Your faithful giving continues to not only sustain our needs to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ but as a percentage of those gifts are sent to other churchwide partners we are able together to support and sustain ministries such as Lutheran Services in Iowa, Lutheran World Relief, Free Indeed prison ministry, additional hunger ministries within our Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and so many other partnership we share as we work together in the name of Christ.

God is great! (Say it with me) Let our neighbors whom God loves hear these wonderful words of joy! God is great. We wait, not alone, but we wait together, and we wait abiding in the love of Christ who is with us.

I want to conclude with the final words Paul speaks to the Thessalonians because they are another invaluable guide that marks our time of waiting. “Therefore, encourage one another with these words.” Encourage one another. Love one another. Let your light shine for another brother or sister when their light seems to be fading. The world is waiting amidst much uncertainty, tension, turmoil, hatred, fear, and anxiety. We can feed into that or, guided by the Holy Spirit, we can trust in the promise we have all the oil we need and our salvation is secure and we can “encourage one another” with these words, “Christ has died (for all). Christ has risen (for all). Christ will come again (for all who believe in His name).” There is hope. God is great! You are loved.