November 8, 2026
Pentecost 24 - Proper 27A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

In the Name of the God whose coming we await. Amen.

Today is the first of what I think of as the Waiting Sundays. This is the 3rd Sunday before Advent, when the liturgical year will begin again. The Scriptures we will hear through the end of this month tell of the End Times, culminating in Matthew's vision of Jesus separating the sheep and the goats.

Advent, when it comes, will gift us with its own kind of waiting, keeping the baby Jesus in the wings until the very last minute – vastly different from the world around us.

How do you react when you're forced to wait, to cool your heels? Maybe waiting for election results? Or, perhaps at a traffic light that never seems to change. Or when you hear, "The doctor will be right in." "Your table should be ready in 20 minutes." "Your call is very important to us." How do you react? Teeth grind. Blood pressure rises. Watches are checked. Managers are summoned. None of us likes to wait. We live in a world of the immediate. Whatever it is that we want, we want it now.

But the Christian story, our Christian story, is filled with waiting – especially waiting for Jesus to come again. Almost from the beginning, the Church has wrestled with how to understand sayings of Jesus like, *truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom* (Mt. 16:8).

In writing to the Thessalonians, St. Paul clearly thought it possible that Jesus would come again in his lifetime. *For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died* (1 Thess. 4:15).

Over the centuries, countless folks have scrutinized the Scriptures, trying to puzzle out when, how, and to whom, Jesus was coming. Many specific dates for the Second Coming have been predicted (and passed),[1] despite Jesus' own warning that *no one knows of that day and hour, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but my Father only* (Mt. 24:36).

[1] Such predictions increased throughout the 20th century.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predictions_and_claims_for_the_Second_Coming

This temptation continues unabated in our own day. Landon Schnabel, an associate professor of sociology at Cornell University who studies religion and social change writes that "Tens of millions of American evangelicals hold some version of dispensational premillennialism — the belief that conflict in the Middle East will trigger Christ's return. This is a well-documented strand of American religion, not a fringe view."

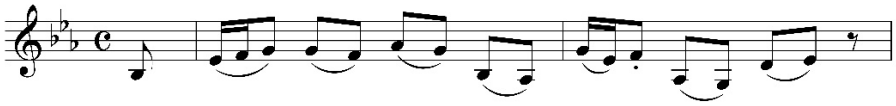
More disturbingly, Schnabel reports that "Over 110 service members across every branch and more than 30 installations have reported commanders framing the Iran war as fulfillment of biblical prophecy. … End-times theology didn't infiltrate the military. It was invited in.[2]

Now, we may tut-tut, or worse, at such folks, but let's remember that every Sunday, in the Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief that Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and that his kingdom will have no end.

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With that in mind, and without any further waiting, let's turn to today's gospel. I confess that I have a deep love for the story Matthew tells today. And it was quite a shock in the last several weeks to discover that among my scripture study colleagues in Connecticut, Indiana, and here in St. Louis, I seem to be alone in that affection. What, I thought, is wrong with these people?

A little reflection on this question led me to the music of J.S. Bach's Cantata 140, *Wachet auf* (*Wake, awake*) which he wrote in 1731 to illuminate the very gospel story we hear this morning.[3] {10:30 – we sang the hymn *Sleepers Wake!* on the way in.} Each time I hear this music, everything in me glows with joy; there's no gloom of shut doors here. In the fourth movement, Bach lays down a riff that has me on tiptoe, leaning forward in anticipation[4].



That music is why I love this story.

But it is clear that the parable of wise and foolish wedding attendants is difficult for many to hear. Perhaps it is difficult for you, as well.

Here are some of the reactions I've heard. The story doesn't make any sense because the wedding customs of Jesus' time are nothing like our own. Why did the wedding attendants have to bring their own lamps to the party? The "wise" attendants

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[2] https://news.cornell.edu/media-relations/tip-sheets/end-times-rhetoric-us-military-didnt-infiltrate-was-invited

[3] A terrific performance of this masterpiece is by the Netherlands Bach Society. https://youtu.be/DqZE54i-muE

[4] Ritornello from movement 4, *Zion hört die Wächter singen*.

seem selfish, and the door shutting feels inhospitable, even mean. Why is the groom delayed? And, by the way, where the heck is the bride?

I haven't found a single, simple interpretation that addresses these rough edges. But one of the characteristics of a parable is that it allows us to turn it over and over in our fingers like a diamond, observing what its different facets reveal, even when there are contradictions.[5]

So, let's begin with some questions about one of those facets. Do you believe that there will be a wedding banquet someday? Do you recall the last time you heard someone preach on the Second Coming? When's the last time you thought, "Goodness me! What if today is the day that God's reign comes in all its fullness? What if today is the day that God restores our broken earth, ushering in the new creation?"

We've seen that the church has always had some anxiety about Jesus' return. Where was he? How long, O Lord, must we wait? Many of us have grown accustomed, even indifferent to his absence. In spite of what we say in the Creeds, we don't really believe he's going to return. After all, that "parting of the clouds" stuff is a little embarrassing, isn't it?

Embarrassing it might be, but letting go of a belief in some form of a Second Coming presents two problems. First, as we've heard, Jesus said that he would return. So, there's that.

Second, the coming of God's reign with all its fullness of healing and justice-making is the gold standard against which all our own attempts at healing and justice-making, or lack thereof, will be measured. God's wedding banquet is our standard, our ideal. Without it we have no accountability, nothing to lean into as we labor in God's name.

Another facet of the parable is this. There is going to be a wedding banquet, but it's not going to go the way you think. In the parable, the attendants have to wait so long for the groom's arrival that they fall asleep. They all fall asleep. I can't imagine any of them either expected the delay, or would have chosen to wait that long.

Those we call "wise" heeded the Scouting motto to "Be Prepared," and brought extra oil against the possibility of the unexpected. They are adaptable when a delay causes a change of plans.

I can imagine the other five making some calculations before they left home. "I have X amount of oil, which will be plenty. I've been to scads of these things; I know exactly what to expect." How do they deal with a bridegroom whose notions of time, faithfulness, and celebration differ from theirs?

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[5] Deep thanks to the musings of Debie Thomas' *The Story of the Bridesmaids*. Posted 01 November 2020.

Here's another facet. Sometimes, doors close; do what is needful now. Lots of people hate that the five foolish attendants have the door closed on them. But like it or not, doors do close, chances do fade, time does run out. And the opportunity to mend the friendship, or forgive the debt, or heal the wound — closes down.

We like to tell ourselves that there's still time left. But what if there isn't? What if this parable is telling us to be alert now, to be awake now? To live as if each day is all we have? Not to presume that tomorrow belongs to you.

Still another facet. You are more valuable than your oil supply, so stick around. As I read the story, the mistake the five "foolish" attendants make is that they leave. Maybe they think their oil supply is more important to the groom than their presence at his party. By leaving, they deprive themselves of a wonderful celebration, and they deprive the bridegroom of their presence and companionship.

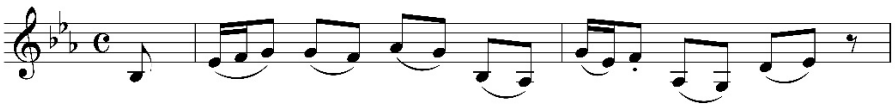
This is a mistake I understand. I know how hard it is to stick around when my "light" is fading, much less when I'm burned out, and don't feel presentable. I get what it's like to scramble to be perfect, to get all my ducks in a row, to get right with God, before showing up anywhere. Just think how much oil all that burns up.

What if we could believe that the groom delights in our presence – in all its flickering, imperfect messiness? Perhaps one of the lessons of this parable is this: don't allow your fear or your sense of inadequacy to keep you away from the party.

And if, for whatever reason you do leave, I want you to hold on to this hope. You will be invited to the next party, because God is always inviting. This time, maybe you'll be more intentional about going. Maybe you'll bring more oil; maybe you'll put the address in your phone.

I do not believe the door shutting is about people going to hell. I do, however, believe it is a warning. If you don't want to miss something, you need to show up…and then trust that God, who is light, will do God's part to light your way.[6]

That thought allows me to wait, on tiptoes, with joy.



Amen.

[6] Thank you to my colleague and friend Rebecca Wright from the School of Theology at Sewanee.