

“While We Are Waiting”

Neil Engle
December 2, 2007
Text: Matthew 24:36-44

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

Twenty years ago, I was serving as an Associate Pastor of Hillside Christian Church in Kansas City, Missouri. We offered multiple worship services, and coffee and donuts in between. One elderly couple – Ernie and Ellen – would always each grab a cup of coffee and drink it before they went into the sanctuary. I discovered after awhile that they didn’t get their cups from the same coffee pot; Ernie would hit the caffeinated coffee; Ellen, the de-caf. One day while we were standing around during the coffee hour, Ernie volunteered to me that he got caffeinated coffee to stay awake during church – in other words, my sermons were so boring that he needed help getting through them, and Ellen, well, I guess for her, my sermons were so boring that she’d prefer to sleep right through them. Now Christy, you and I are going to have the opportunity to hear each other preach in the days ahead. I have no doubt I will enjoy hearing your sermons – let’s just hope you develop neither the desire to sleep through mine nor the need to be kept awake while I’m in the pulpit.

What’s going on in today’s text from Matthew? Is it simply a case of Jesus telling the disciples to avoid the de-caf the next time they stop at the Jerusalem Starbucks? What’s going on here, anyway? Well, first of all, it’s important to remember that in all three cycles of our lectionary – the ecumenically agreed-upon list of scripture readings for each Sunday – the Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent always addresses the return of Christ. Last year the text was from Luke, this year it’s Matthew, next year it will be from Mark. All three gospel writers describe Jesus admonishing His disciples to watch – to wait – to be alert and expectant for the Lord’s return. Jesus says in Matthew, “You must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” By the time Matthew writes his gospel, lots of those early Christians seemed to be drinking de-caf. Their vigil of waiting for the return of Christ had grown boring, filled with yawns and sighs. That boredom and lethargy soon gave way to apathy. Perhaps Matthew felt that the threatening words and warning of Jesus were what was needed to awaken the church.

Matthew tells us that in order to make His point, Jesus brings up a heavy hitter – Noah. The story of Noah presents a stark parallel for Jesus in His warnings about the sudden coming in judgment at the end of history. After all, back in the days of Noah – people were having a great time – there were parties, there were buffet lines and open bars and all kinds of wedding receptions. And then God rained on the parade, and only Noah and his family were wise enough to heed God’s warning and to save themselves. When Jesus returns, so the disciples are told, it will be like that. Life will seem very normal in the daily activities. People will be conducting their lives at the corner of the everyday and the routine – with some buying and selling, working in the fields to produce a crop, grinding their wheat into flour at the mill – just doing the 9-5 thing – and suddenly, without warning, the Lord will return.

And not only that, Jesus tells them, some will be ready and some will not. Some will have recalled the words Jesus has given about His Kingdom and how to live in readiness for the Kingdom to be fulfilled. But some will not remember, and other things will have become important to them. And those people, those who have forgotten or disbelieved or neglected, will be the disappointed ones on that day.

Now remember, just a little earlier in Matthew’s gospel, the disciples have pressed Jesus to tell them exactly when He would return – they wanted to be able to enter that information into their palm pilots and blackberries so they wouldn’t miss it. They didn’t want to be left behind. Before the recent crop of “Left Behind” books, there was a song – I remember singing it when I was in high school. In 1969, Larry Norman wrote these lyrics:

Life was filled with guns and war
And everyone got trampled on the floor.
I wish we’d all been ready.
Children died, the days grew cold,
A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold.
I wish we’d all been ready.
There’s no time to change your mind,
The Son has come and you’ve been left behind.

A man and wife asleep in bed,
She hears a noise, she turns her head, he’s gone!
I wish we’d all been ready.
Two men walking up a hill,

One disappears and one's left standing still.
I wish we'd all been ready.
There's no time to change your mind,
The Son has come and you've been left behind.

There's no time to change your mind.
How could you have been so blind?
The Father spoke, the demons dined,
The Son has come and you've been left behind.
You've been left behind
You've been left behind!

The disciples want to know when Jesus is coming again so they can set their clocks. But this is not a question of when and this is not about Jesus. It's a question of what and it's about the disciples themselves. Jesus tells them to stay awake – to watch – to wait – to be prepared. The focus is upon what the disciples are to be doing in the meantime. It's about the quality of their waiting.

When you're waiting for someone or something, what's your attitude? In what frame of mind do you wait? The answer may depend upon that for which we wait. Some of us, if we're waiting for a stoplight to change or a doctor to see us, or to pay for a purchase, wait impatiently. We drum our fingers, roll our eyes, clear our throats, and mutter under our breath, "Come on, come on, let's go." I remember feeling that way the last time I went to the movie theater and had to endure commercials and endless previews. Let's just get to the feature attraction.

Are you a patient waiter? I'm sure many of you are – you're not as impatient or antsy as I am. What about feeling bored? Let's face it, sometimes waiting is boring – it's tedious and uninteresting. Sometimes when we wait, we feel powerless. We go to pay a bill or order something and discover the computer is down, so we have to wait until another day to conduct our business. We get into the fastest moving line at the grocery store and then wait for the person in front of us to get a price check and then redeem 84 coupons.

Sometimes when we wait – it's with a feeling of dread or apprehension – we'd rather not have to face that which is at the end of the wait. The doctor calls on Friday and says, "Your test results came back – come in on Monday and we'll discuss them." Perhaps a friend or loved one has a terminal illness – you know the ultimate outcome but you're dreading it. Sometimes that's how we wait – with a sense of fear.

Jesus says to watch and wait – not feeling impatient, not feeling bored or powerless, not with a sense of apprehension or dread. No, Jesus calls for active waiting – for expectant waiting. For we Christians, life is a time of waiting – waiting for the Gospel to be fulfilled, waiting for the breaking-in realm of God to come among us, waiting for greater knowledge and awareness of God's word to break into our consciousness. Waiting well with our minds on the Lord's teachings and our hearts ready to live in the world as God calls us to do.

The quality of waiting to which Christ calls us does not consist of standing outside on some hillside with our necks craned to the heavens, scanning the horizon for the return of Christ. Nor does it consist of joining some cult or commune which has figured out the precise moment when Jesus will come back – we've seen those groups come and go and Christ hasn't. Nor is the quality of waiting characterized by an attitude that says, "Heaven is really where it's at" – that life here on earth is something to be tolerated until we reach the sweet by and by in the sky, and that our only purpose on earth is to gain entry into heaven. We don't give up our belief in the return of Christ or our affirmation regarding life beyond the grave. But we also believe that we live together in this world as Kingdom people, as Easter people, as Advent people in the serious role as Gospel people.

Advent people – Gospel people are concerned about peace and justice, about the well being of the poor, the disadvantaged, those whom society tells us are disposable or undesirable. Advent people seek not to be sucked into the obscene materialism of the season. Those of us waiting expectantly for the return of Jesus Christ are to live responsibly in the interim, as Paul says in Romans – we are to be busy – remember a few weeks ago when we talked about no worky – no eatery? We are not to be seduced by hatred and violence toward our enemies. Our work is not over simply because we have preached "repent and be saved" lest we be the ones left behind. Those of us who are baptized, who confess our sins frequently and who claim to share in God's salvation are also people who are commanded to love our neighbor with a love that makes demands for self-sacrifice every day.

We stand, as did Matthew's community, in the in-between time – between the first and second coming of Christ – between beautiful memory and blessed hope. How are we going to spend our time? Whether we meet the Lord at the moment of our own death or whether we meet the Lord in some universal awareness of His coming again into this world, we will surely meet Him. The important thing for us is not when we see Jesus, but what the quality of our waiting will have been in the meantime.

O God – your people waited 4,000 years – we wait for four weeks. But really, we too wait a lifetime – for waiting is the stuff of life. Lord, help us to watch, to wait – to love and be active in these passing days until your Son is born again in our hungry and yearning hearts. Amen.

Thanks to Professor William Hethcock for his words and insights.