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Colorado Springs, Colorado
May 6, 2012
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Wait, Wait.... Mat 25:1-13

Matthew 25:1-13 NRSV "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' 12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

In our first churches out of seminary, in the wilds of the west Texas desert, Barbara and I had, at the time, four children at home under the age of eight. And although we liked to go out to eat we didn't do it as much as we might have wanted to since even with children's menus it was too expensive to do very often on those first-church-out-of-seminary salaries. And when we did go out to eat we had a rule for the children: only one soda pop. Now that was in a time, unlike many places today, when most restaurants charged full-price for refills of sodas. So our one-soda-pop rule was designed to save both our wallets and the experience of the folks in the restaurant – because over-sugared children in public are not one of the world's great delights. Our children would always spend a great deal of time deciding whether they wanted a Coke or a Sprite or a root beer or a Dr Pepper or whatever. And after they had finally decided, their drinks usually came very quickly – because restaurants know that there is a huge profit to be made in soft drinks compared to food.

And so now there it was in front of them – their **one** soda pop. And the reactions of

each of the children were very different as they waited for their food. One of them would handle his soda almost lovingly, gently, taking a few delicate sips now and then. Another child, though, was always the reckless one – the soda was gulped down in a few minutes' time leaving only the crushed ice and the memories. A third child acted more like Hamlet: "To drink, or not to drink; that is the question." Each one of them had their own style and strategy of waiting. And each style, you can probably see, had something going for it. But each one of those strategies also became increasingly less effective, increasingly less helpful, the longer the food was delayed. The waiting grew harder and harder. And so they began to fidget and they began to fight with each other and they began to wonder whether they'd made the right choices: *"Maybe I shouldn't have drunk it all so fast"* or *"Maybe I should have just gulped it right down; at least I would have had something!"*

Waiting. That is what these Sundays following Easter are about according to the Bible, for they recall the disciples waiting for the Holy Spirit to come to them at Pentecost. Because that's what Jesus told them to do: Wait. Here's the way the book of Acts puts it: *[Jesus] ordered [the disciples] not to leave Jerusalem, but to **wait** there for the promise of the Father,* telling them, *"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."* Wait. Wait. Now, I have to tell you, I hate to wait. It is not one of my spiritual gifts. And I suspect the disciples there in those weeks after that first Easter hated waiting as well. Because, remember, they didn't know – like we do – when that waiting would be over. All they knew was that Jesus had told them to wait and the Spirit would come. Sometime. And as they were trying to wait and trying to figure out their own strategies for doing so, I can't help but think they might have remembered the story told in our scripture for this morning. For it too is about waiting when you don't know when what you're waiting for is coming. It is a parable, as Jesus is so fond of telling. And it reflects the wedding customs of the day where the wedding itself was preceded by an evening's banquet that could start

most any time. It depended when everyone could get home from their jobs, home from working the fields, cleaned up and dressed up and ready to party. But by then it's dark outside and there are no streetlights and in order to get to the party safely you need to have your lamp. Now if you read it carefully, you may notice that there are actually two points made in this parable. The first is this: *"be prepared."* Make *sure* you have enough oil, make *sure* you keep the wicks of your lamps trimmed, make *sure* you don't let your lamp go out. Make *sure* you make your lists and check them twice. Be prepared! But the **other** point of this parable is found there in the last verse: *"Keep **awake** therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."* Don't fall asleep. Stay alert. Be on your toes. Two messages in this parable, then, be prepared and stay awake.

And so, as I said, I would wager that the disciples, hunkered down there in Jerusalem, Jesus having come and gone with a vague promise that the Spirit would come upon them "sometime" remembered this parable about waiting. They didn't know when, and they didn't know what to do with themselves in the meantime. And so they too waited. And they had rather weightier things to concern them than how to deal with their soda pops! Such as: What could Jesus have meant by the Holy Spirit's coming to us? Shall we keep quiet about this or shall we tell others? Are Herod and Pilate still looking for us who were His followers? Should we keep our heads down or should we continue to talk about Jesus? And so they waited. And they remembered: be prepared and stay awake. But what could that double counsel really mean for them as they waited, and what can it mean for us when we have those times in our lives when we must wait?

Well, the more I muse on this parable's double message,, the more I realize that both "be prepared" and "stay awake" are necessary – but, at the same time, focusing too much on just one of them will in fact defeat the other! What do I mean? Well, too much preparation means that you can often miss the charm and spontaneity and grace that

happens when you are not expecting it. Barbara and I used to see many tourists in Hawaii who were so armed with their guidebooks and itineraries, who had prepared so very, very well, that they missed the best things that were right in front of their eyes. As John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens to you when you are busy making plans."

On the other hand, being so focused on simply staying awake – vigilant, in touch with everything, senses on high alert – can sometimes mean that you don't prepare adequately. The first time in my life I ever went camping I was wide awake, excited – and woefully under-prepared. I pitched my tent in the darkness without the slightest preparation of studying the terrain or thinking about what preparations might be wise given the darkening clouds overhead. I simply reveled in the endless sky and dark high desert land as the sun set. And I woke up the next morning with my air mattress floating on two inches of very, very cold water that had poured in overnight from the uphill-facing door. And so the potential for that weekend was lost due to lack of preparation – I don't remember much of the rugged beauty of the desert mountains but I do remember being damp and chilled the whole time. And what should have been a time for unhurried conversations and growing closer to my camp-mates away from the distractions of the daily routine instead turned into a miserable weekend of clock-watching – only another 22 hours and I can get out of here!

Now, let me ask you: What are **you** waiting for in **your** life? And how do you go about that waiting? Have **your** strategies for doing so been **unsuccessful** sometimes? I suspect that this has been the case for all of us at one time or another. It is hard to "stay awake," to stay on high alert at all times. It's exhausting. And, what's worse, it tends to make you paranoid. Like those first-year medical students who are convinced that they have every disease that they study, because their minds are so intensely full of facts and possibilities. Or, on the other hand, how about the strategy of always trying to be utterly

prepared, of making sure you always have way more than enough oil and that you keep your wicks trimmed? Are you one of those folks who waits by doing all the right things? Yet this too sometimes can be the road to frustration – how many of us have known folks who have indeed prepared by having done all the right things, eaten all the right foods, obeyed all the latest counsels, invested wisely, planned ahead – and then something terrible happened that made all of that good planning, all of that strategy for nought?

How **do** we wait when the stakes are high? How do we wait when what we're waiting for is uncertain? Because that's when the waiting is hardest, and that's when we wish someone **would** tell us, we wish God would get a whole lot clearer about what it is that we're waiting for and when it's coming. Writer Anne Lamott puts it this way, talking about wishing God would be clearer when we're waiting: *"I don't understand,"* she writes, *"why it would hurt so much if just once in His life, He used a megaphone. But He never does."*¹

Let me suggest two things we can do when we are waiting, two things that I believe will deepen our relationship with God and deepen our faith. The first is – particularly when the waiting is hardest – to do something for others. Why? Well, one of the worst things about waiting is that it tends to both isolate us and it tends to focus us so inwardly that we become self-absorbed. My wise wife Barbara is fond of saying that one of the best spiritual disciplines that there is – particularly when you are tempted to feel sorry for yourself, or you are tempted to think that there is no one who could have it worse than you – is to find someone who needs you and do something about it.

A second thing is to remember that our destiny and our hope and our significance is simply not in our hands. It is good to be prepared. It beats haphazard and lackadaisical any day. And it's good to stay awake and alert. Being alert means that you notice the

¹<http://www.salon.com/dec96/lamott961202.html>

things about creation that God hopes you notice. But where Jesus' parable about waiting can mislead is if we think that somehow it is the quality of our preparation or the thoroughness of our awakesness that will finally make the difference. No, what finally makes the difference is that God is with us and God does not abandon us and God waits there alongside us. The church since its earliest days has always said that it is never the quality of our works that ensures our faith, or ensures God's presence. Again, let me allow Anne Lamott to illustrate the point with a wonderful story she tells about her friend Tom who went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He happened to be there on a night when the group was discussing the third step of AA's Twelve Steps, the one that says you must turn your life and will over to the care of God. Tom called her and

...reported over the phone that this group ...had a meeting whose topic was about the 3rd Step, about letting go, and the name of this meeting was Drop the Rock. The Drop the Rock meeting was based on the understanding that left to our own devices, we... tend to lug these big rocks around. They are the rocks of our concerns. Every time we get up, we reach down for our big rock and then we lug it out the door, down the stairs, and roll it into the back seats of our cars. Then after we drive someplace, we open the back door, get out our rock, and carry it with us, wherever we go. Because it's our rock. It is very important to us and we need to keep it in sight. Also, someone could steal it. So these... [AA members] suggest that you practice dropping the rock. That you put it down, on the ground at your feet. And that you say to God...: "Here. I'm giving you the rock. YOU deal with it."²

That's very, very good advice. Drop the rock. Drop the rock. Because while you're waiting on those things that make your life anxious it is not the quality of your preparations that will save you. It is not the degree of alertness and awakesness that you manage to keep hold of that will give you comfort. Because if you think that it is then I can also guarantee you that you will worry that you haven't done enough, that there was something more you could have done to prepare for whatever it is you're waiting for. If you think that it is then I

²<http://www.salon.com/dec96/lamott961202.html>

guarantee that you will have too many 3:00 a.m.'s where you are doing the regret game, the "if only I would have" game.

And those are soul-deadening. They are isolating. And you don't need to do it. My friends, the good news this morning is that whatever it is that you are waiting for – whatever it is! – you never wait alone. For while God may not use a megaphone, God does nudge and lure and gently remind you that you are loved, that you are cared for, that nothing can change that. It is the truth that is expressed in our Prayer Hymn this morning, using words which come from the prophet Isaiah: "those who **wait** for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with **wings like eagles**, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Will you stand and sing it with me?