

Proper 27 – 2014 Kate Reuer Welton

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh God.

Goodness. This one's a doozy, huh?

Not only the metaphor is lost on us, originating in a time when bridesmaids used to accompany the bridegroom to the wedding.

But the more confusing, and challenging, part for me is that I strongly suspect that I might not have brought enough oil. I am inconsistently organized in my personal life, and it seems like the most important things are often the things that get left behind. So it makes sense that I'd show up without extra oil.

And whether you relate to the bridesmaids or not, the consequences of not bringing the oil hardly seem fair, right? All of the bridesmaids were there on time, with their lamps, and they also all fell asleep in the waiting. The only difference is that some were less prepared than others, and they therefore were left outside, unknown to the Bridegroom.

Goodness. Again. This does not speak to my sense of a merciful and loving God, and I'm guessing the same is true for you. And so, we return to the text again, this time rooting it in the context of the day.

Early Christians had become accustomed to waiting. Rooted in a sense of Jewish identity, their concept of a Messiah was one who would return immanently, and usher in a world where healing and renewal would be known by all. But by the time these early Christians were transcribing the Gospel of Matthew, many of them had grown tired of this kind of active anticipation. Has anyone, either through life circumstances, by reading a book, or hearing an inspiring message, has anyone ever felt challenged, or invited, to 'live each day as if it's your last?' This can be an exhilarating task, at first. And as the days turn into months, and the months turn into years, it can also be quite exhausting.

As you think about one of the early communities committed to following the Way of Jesus, and still expecting his return, and wanting to encourage others to continue in their waiting, this text starts to sound more compassionate, I think. It makes room for the falling asleep, but still exhorts people to pay attention.

Now...as the years turn into decades, and the decades into centuries, and the centuries into Millenia, we as a church don't anticipate the immanent return of Christ in the same way that those early Christians did. We are rooted in a different time and place, and our sense of what it means to have God show up in our midst is quite different than theirs.

And this is where the text starts to get interesting. Because though we might not anticipate a Messianic return, we do all wait, right? And many of us, in the midst of our waiting also long for God to show up in that pregnant place, ripe with anticipation and possibility, and still robust with fear of the unknown.

What are those places and spaces in your life where you are waiting? Maybe you're accompanying a parent on a journey with Alzheimers, or you're a student awaiting news about an internship for this summer. Maybe you're eagerly anticipating the birth of a new child, or waiting on test results. Maybe we're waiting for a day when racism will cease to exist, or where everyone will have access to a great education. We wait in so many ways, and for so many things. What is it that you're waiting for?

As I was writing this sermon, I thought about the many times I have a distinct memory of waiting in my life. Among and amidst those times that are most prescient in my memory is the memory of the waiting room when my mother was having surgery. She'd been diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer, and was having aggressive surgery, with modest hopes of a cure, but promises of buying more time. We were all up early in the morning. Around 7:30 am, she was prepped, and taken into the operating room. We said our tearful goodbyes, and were faced with a four hour wait before we'd hear anything from the operating room. My brother, father and I waited, and paced, and ate too many cookies and drank too much coffee. We stared past the

television, and barely talked to each other. As 11:30 turned into 12:30, we started hovering near the phone, wondering what the delay could be. The intensity of each moment seemed to expand as we expected news any minute. When we finally talked to the surgeon, around 1:00 that day, we heard good news. And I'm happy to tell you that my mom is healthy and cancer free today. But the waiting in that brown room in a hospital in South Dakota will always be fresh in my mind.

God's presence seemed palpable. And I can't put my finger on why, necessarily.

But I suspect it had something to do with the intensity of those hours. Our lamps were burning bright, so to speak.

But, for those moments that might be more extended, or less extreme, I want to wonder with you, what might it take to really see God in the waiting? What does it mean to make sure you have extra oil, so that even if you fall asleep, you'll be able to see God in and amongst those times of waiting in your life?

There are so many things that cloud our vision, that burn our oil up, and convince us that we don't need extra stores. As we scroll through our facebook feed while waiting for the bus, or check email while nursing a child; as we watch television during family meals, or listen to our favorite podcast while going for a run, I wonder if our capacity to wait, and to be present to the possibility of God's presence in our midst, might not be diminished by the pressure we feel to multi-task, and the dis-ease we experience with unproductive time. None of these distractions are bad, in and of themselves, but when practiced habitually, we are consistently taken out of the present moment. Our ability to see what is, is trumped by our need for more stimulation, more distraction, and we burn out.

Waiting can be such a powerful time, as we sit between one reality and the next. As we look forward to Advent, we anticipate a period that lifts up waiting, and actively anticipating God's new day as an important spiritual practice. But in this text today, we lift up those times of

waiting, those thin places where God's presence is most palpable, as meaningful in and of themselves.

So, brothers and sisters, do what you need to do to keep extra stores of oil, for without them you really will burn out, and it will be hard to sense God in the waiting. BUT, also know that our God is a God of limitless oil, a God that shares freely. God shows up in our midst, and God shows up for you. God loves each one of you, before and beyond your ability to feel God's presence. And God forgives you before and beyond your ability to even ask for forgiveness. God is with you in the waiting, and with you in the longing. May it be so. Amen. Amin.

Matthew 25:1-13

25“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But 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.’ ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

