

**Matthew 25:1-13**

**WAITING ... IN HOPE**

What kind of a waiter are you? I'm not asking what you are like at taking food to people at their tables or collecting their dishes after a meal, but what are you like when you are waiting for something to happen, for someone to come, for something to start? Are you a patient waiter, able to just bide your time until the upcoming event, happening, or arrival occurs? Are you an expectant waiter, finding as much pleasure in the wait as you do in the culmination of what you are waiting for? Perhaps you are an impatient waiter; when you're ready you are ready, let's just hurry up and get on with it? And then, whichever of these types of waiter you fall into, or another, consider also: are you a prepared waiter, wanting to have everything ready to go ahead of time and ready for any contingencies, or unprepared, happy to chill and just grab what you need when the time comes? Or, most likely, as we say about many things, are you a different kind of waiter depending on what you are waiting for, what you are doing while you're waiting, who you are with? We actually, I believe, need all of these kinds of people in our world, even though it is differences like these which can lead to tensions and frustrations in relationships. But it is good to think about, 'what kind of waiter am I?', and to consider the situations when I can use that as a strength, and those in which I need to work on adjusting when it is a weakness.

What kind of a waiter are you? This is the question which is asked by the parable Jesus tells in our reading from Matthew here today. Jesus often used wedding banquets as the basis for His parables about the coming of God's kingdom, because back then, like often today, they were a big deal and required a lot of preparation to get ready for. In this parable there are ten young women who accompany the bride while she awaits the arrival of the groom. Their oil lamps burn out because the groom is late to arrive, but only five have thought to bring extra oil. While the five who were unprepared go off to buy more oil, the groom arrives and those who are ready are taken into the wedding feast with him. When the others return, now topped up with oil, they find themselves locked out of the feast they had been looking forward to. And the

warning Jesus gives at the end of this parable: 'So, my disciples, always be ready! You don't know the day or the time when all this will happen.' (13)

Always be ready, you don't know the day or the time when Jesus will come again. It's a warning which comes up a lot in the Bible, and which shows up in our readings at this time of the year. It's a real warning. At the time of the Early Church, just after Jesus' life on earth, because of warnings like this Christians were waiting for Jesus to come again, and were disappointed and worried when fellow believers died before this happened; what would happen to them? 2,000 years later we're still waiting.

Over the years many times people have tried to predict when this time will come based on prophecies and signs in the Bible, using events like the current war in Gaza to point to the fulfillment of this time. But Jesus says very plainly, here and elsewhere, you don't know when the time will happen, so always be ready. We can't begin to predict the time this will happen, so why do people both continue to do that and to believe those who say they can? Perhaps we just want certainty and something to aim for, because then it is easy to be ready. But that's not the point of what the Bible teaches: 'always be ready?'

So, how are we ready, and how do we know we are? Is God wanting us to live our lives in fear for ourselves and our loved ones? The warnings are there, but how do we take them? That's something Christians differ on a lot. Many years ago at the country town where I was a pastor some of members of our local ministers fraternal wanted all the churches to come together to sponsor a production called *Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flames*. Someone had a video which was passed around the group to watch so we could discuss it at our next monthly meeting. I looked it up on YouTube and it is still out there and being presented today. My memory is that the presentation consists of a number of skits in which people either had faith or had moved away from their faith, or they were doing something wrong they wouldn't normally do, then they unexpectedly died and found themselves at the gates of heaven, where some were let in and others turned away, depending solely on what they believed and what they were doing at the time of their death. The one story I remember is of the teenage daughter of a pastor who had lived a life of faith, but one night was out partying with friends, drinking alcohol and doing sinful stuff like that, and she and her friends died in a car accident. When she got to heaven she was sent away, with the message I remember being that it didn't matter about anything else in her life, when she died she was doing what seen as a sin

so she was sent to hell. Enough members of our fraternal disagreed with this message that we didn't end up presenting it in our town.

Always be ready. As Christians too often over the years and still today we have used this message to put ourselves above others, in a hypocritical way to see and promote ourselves as being ready while those people over there, they aren't. How hypocritical this is. I know there are many times when if I was to die in what I was doing or what I had just done, or said, or was thinking, or where my faith was at, I wouldn't pass the heavenly entrance standards we often set. And I challenge that nobody, if their words, and thoughts, and actions, and faith were laid open to public view, if anybody would reach those perfect standards. The warning from the Bible to be ready is most certainly there, we shouldn't ignore it, but too often for the sake of building ourselves up over others we have used it to try scare people *into* heaven, when most times we've probably scared them *away* from God's love instead.

So, how are we ready, and how do we know we are? What kind of waiters are we? We are waiting in hope. We are living in the last times. If anyone knocks on your door and tells you that you can say to them, 'yes, we are, we have been for the last 2,000 years and we don't know when this time of waiting will end'. And if they ask, "Are you ready for that?", you can say, 'Yes I am, because God in sending Jesus to die and rise for me has made me ready, and He gives me the faith to hold on to this truth of His love and forgiveness.' But in this parable there is a warning. We get ready for many things in life, like retirement, holidays, weddings, moving, and we spend a lot of time, energy, and money on that. In the midst of all this we can neglect being ready with God, which involves spending time with Him, worshipping Him, time in His Word, time encouraging and being encouraged by other Christians. Hear the warning, take it in, so that you remain close to the faith in Jesus as your Saviour which God wants to give to you.

Earlier I said that the Early Church 2,000 years ago worried about people who had died before Jesus came again; would they be saved? Paul and others wrote to these Christian communities to give them comfort about this, and their words also give comfort to us as we wonder if we are ready for Jesus' coming again. In our second reading for today Paul says, 'My friends, we want you to understand how it will be for those followers who have already died. Then you won't grieve over them and be like people who don't have any hope. We believe Jesus died and was raised to life. We also believe that when God brings Jesus

back again, he will bring with him all who had faith in Jesus before they died.’ (*1 Thess. 4:13-14 CEV*)

We have hope, in Jesus, through our faith. Whether it is faith of a mustard seed or faith which can move mountains, faith which enables us to walk on water or which weakly cries out, ‘Save me, Lord’, it is that faith which gives us hope and helps us know we are ready.

I’ve shared with you before that as a pastor one of the privileges I have is to often be with people when they are in their last times. On every occasion, the peace, the assurance, the comfort, they get from their faith is beautiful, mind-blowing, full of certain hope for both them and their family. At those times I’ve never heard people talk about what they have done, or the faith they have had, or declare, ‘yes, I’ve made myself ready’. They confess their faith in Jesus as their Saviour, they hold on to a wooden palm cross, they respond to Bible readings and prayers which are said with them and their family when they hadn’t responded to anything for days. At that time, they show that they know their lamps are full of oil, they are ready to go into the feast, simply because their sure and certain hope lies solely in what God has done for them in Jesus.

What kind of a waiter are you? It is good that we are all different kinds of waiters for the things in this life, unless we take that to extremes where it affects others. But when it comes to waiting to go into God’s Kingdom, whether that’s when Jesus comes again, or most likely for most of us when we leave this life, we can all be waiting in hope. Give time, energy, and effort to your relationship with God, so that you do remain in your faith in all He has done for you, and so you can live your life in confidence and joy with Him as you are waiting ... in hope. Amen.

**FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:**

- What kind of waiter are you: patient or impatient? Prepared or unprepared? Whatever kind you are, can you think of times when this is a good thing, and times when it is a bad thing?
- Think about the warning Jesus gives here to always be ready. Could you be spending more time with God in prayer, Bible reading, worship, to keep close to Him in faith? What changes is this warning calling you to make in your life?
- Reflect on what it means to be ‘waiting in hope’. What comfort does it give you to know that God has made you ready? Have you known people who have found comfort in this as their death has drawn near? How does living in this hope, instead of the fear of judgement, change how we live our lives?

Pray: thank God that we have a sure and certain hope that we are ready for His kingdom because of our faith in Jesus as our Saviour.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler  
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