

“The Long Wait” 11-12-2017 Matthew 25:1-13 Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Every time I read from the Books of Exodus or Joshua, I find myself asking - again! - *Why did and does God put up with people?* And it seems, from what we read of Joshua, there with his people after they had claimed the promised land and he was about to die, that Joshua also had concern that the people were not going to stay faithful to God. After all, Joshua had seen the disobedience of the people throughout the years in the wilderness. He had heard the people promise to obey God, and then seen them, over and over again, doubt God and complain and even openly rebel against God.

So here Joshua challenged the people he knew too well to re-commit themselves to serve God ONLY. He reminded them of God’s faithfulness, how God had not only brought them out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness for 40 years, God had now delivered the promised land into their hands. Joshua seemed to be pleading with the people, as Moses had done before *he* had died, not to forget God! Serve God; put away anything else that you might be tempted to serve instead. And the people declared that they would serve only God. (We’ve heard that before, haven’t we?)

This past week has been a challenging one for Christians, even in our country. A week ago, 26 members, including babies, of a Baptist Church in rural Texas were murdered, right in their sanctuary as they were worshipping God. And then the defiantly Christian judge Roy Moore in Alabama, who very well may be voted into the U.S. Senate very soon, was recently accused of sexual misconduct years ago with some teenagers. If he turns out to be guilty, Moore joins an ever-larger circle of “Christians” who have ended up verbally condemning others for some of the very things they themselves were doing. And if he isn’t guilty, then some women have lied and made false charges. So either way, the question shouts out: *Why did and does God put up with people?*

Then we have the story Jesus told about the ten bridesmaids, five of whom were prepared for the possible long wait, and five of whom were not well prepared to carry out their duties.

Ten maidens were called to be bridal attendants. It wasn’t like bridesmaids today. These had a specific function, to keep their lamps burning so as to guide the way of the bridal party when the bridegroom arrived. Their job was to always have their lamps burning and not to let them go out. These things could be quite drawn out, and the wait Jesus told about was no exception, for the groom was delayed. In the course of the night, five of the maidens realized that they had underestimated how much oil they would need; their lamps were in danger of going out. So they asked the other girls to share. This would be a fine thing to do under normal circumstances, but on the wedding night, where there were no street-lamps and where their services were necessary for the safety of the wedding party, the other girls could not share without risking the ability of their own lamps to last until the bridegroom arrived. So they refused their “lamp-mates,” and did not share. Even though it was in the middle of the night, the short-on-oil girls left to try to find some more oil. Unfortunately for them, while they were off looking, they missed the arrival of the bridegroom. So they missed out. They missed doing what they had been called to do.

They missed the celebration.

Today's scriptures are intended to challenge us. They would have us ask if we are ready for whatever God is doing in our lives and in this world. Are we prepared to be faithful to God, no matter what? And the big question: Whom are we serving in our lives, God or something else??

We can go along on our merry or not-so-merry ways, making it as well as we can until we finally die, *OR*, we can choose to live for God, which means a faith adventure with the God who knows us and loves us. Yes or no, that's the choice.

To live for God means to have "oil" in our lamps. According to Jesus, what we are called to do is to love God and to love our neighbors, as hard as that often is. We are called to pray for our enemies and to do good even to those who would try to hurt us. We are asked to respond to the needs of other people, whether they're lying in a ditch looking untouchable or dying of hunger in a country we cannot even locate on a map. We are to give our excess "stuff" to those who don't have enough, whether that "stuff" is a coat or a dollar. We are to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick, to respond as best we can to the lonely. By this, our lamps shine in the dark world, and they will not go out because we are serving God.

We must be prepared. Ask a veteran how important it is to properly prepare when serving. A gun needs to be cleaned well. Communications gear needs to be in top shape. Protective gear must be worn. And a solid plan of action needs to be in place and understood by those under command. Preparation can be the difference between success and death in the armed forces. The same is true for first responders, for doctors in an ER, and for Christians *every day*.

Too often, we are caught unprepared; we have been lackadaisical about our relationship with God, and perhaps even unwittingly served something else. My intention in the morning is to read my devotional book, *Jesus Calling*, but too often I turn first to my cell phone... We serve other things in many ways: Kissing the dice before the roll, checking one's horoscope... What if somebody reported that there was a "god of Credit," able to transform near bankruptcy into an 800+ credit score? Or a "Tree of Money," where, if you would simply lay your monthly bills at the foot of the tree and bow to that tree, they bills would all be paid? I've heard folks say, "Sure, if this or that will make my life better or easier, it won't hurt to give it a try."

But wait: That's not what the Christian faith is about! It's not about making it so that we get what we want! It's not about making life easy! It's not even about making sure we're on the reservation list for eternal life! It is about *obedience*, doing what God has asked us to do in our life right now. It is about trust, trusting God even when things aren't going the way we want them to go. It is about faith: believing that the Shepherd is watching over us even when we feel totally abandoned or let down or overwhelmed, all because we have made the commitment to serve God and nothing else.

Preacher Robert S. Crilley once wrote about today's scripture: Usually, it is the people who call out, and *they* who must wait upon the Lord's reply. Here, surprisingly, the roles are reversed: the

call has gone out -- only this time it is heaven which must await a reply.... This is the reason the question is so urgent for Joshua -- God is waiting for a response! (inspired by a sermon by Robert S. Crilley, found at esermons.com)

Heaven is waiting for OUR response! How's that for heavy? But it seems biblical, for throughout the Bible, there is a challenge to human beings to listen for and hear the Word of God and to respond to God's offer of Covenant and to decide whether or not to follow Jesus, and whether or not to dare to accept and share God's steadfast love and forgiveness. It's on us! God has made it possible, but God waits! And even so, *God continues to put up with us!!*

Yesterday morning I went to the grocery store. On the way, I listened to news-talk, about the Democrats maybe having an edge now, about Mr. Trump saying that he thinks Russian leader Putin was being honest when he said that Russia did not interfere in the 2016 election in our country, and more about last Sunday's shooter. Everybody seemed to want to blame somebody else; everybody seemed to want to talk louder than everybody else, and I walked into the grocery store feeling edgy and irritated.

The store itself was crowded and the lines were LONG. The self-check lines had blinking lights, which indicated complications for those trying to check out there, so I resigned myself to stand behind two FULL shopping carts. That was okay, for I wasn't in a huge hurry, but I still wasn't overflowing with any particularly loving thoughts. Then I became aware of the people waiting behind me. A woman much younger than I stood quietly, and then others behind her. There came along an elderly man, hunched over and unsure of step, who started to get at the end of our line. The young woman spoke to him, "Sir, it looks as though you would do better in the express line, for you don't have many items." The man looked confused, and said, "Where would that be?" And the woman replied, "It right down there, Number 10. Just head that way, and you'll see it." The man replied, "Down this way? I legally blind, but I will try to find it." And the young woman first yelled to him, trying to guide him verbally as he haltingly went along, "Keep going, just three more..." But then she left her cart and went with the man to make sure that he found the right line. When she came back, she was beautiful. I saw deep beauty in her, reflected in her caring spirit and willingness to go out of her way to help someone. It hit me how absolutely beautiful we can become, no matter what we look like, if we will only dare to share love with others. This is more powerful than political arguments or even folks going around declaring themselves to be Christian. Love in action is the oil in our lamps; made possible by God, but tended and extended by US.

I think that's what God is waiting for, for each of us and all of us.

In our Old Testament lesson, Joshua challenged the Hebrew people: "Choose this day whom you shall serve." Realizing who it is we are serving is part of our being prepared. Watching for ways to serve the living God who is always in our midst, whether we see God or smell God or feel God or not, is what it means to be alert.

We choose whether to love or to hate, to give or to hoard, to become involved or to withdraw.

We choose to reach out and mend a torn relationship or to let it continue to unravel at the seams. We decide whether to apologize for hurtful words or to add another brick to the wall of silent tension that exists between us and our neighbor. We choose whether to devote our life to something that will mean a difference in this world or to settle into our own little comforts, embracing seclusion, not wanting to get involved. The decision is ours. The opportunity is now. But realize: God may very well be waiting!

I repeat a story shared by Presbyterian preacher/professor/writer Thomas G. Long (2004 sermon, "Is There Joy In God's House?"). He told of a woman struggling to reestablish a relationship with her father. "When I was a child," she recalled, "my dad and I were as close as we could be. And the times I knew it best would be at those family reunions, when after the big meal, they'd move all the furniture, crank up the stereo, and start playing polka records -- one after another. Eventually, someone would put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' It was our special song. And my father would come over with outstretched hand and say, 'Come on, girl, let's roll them blues away!' And we'd dance -- my father and I -- we'd dance.

"As a teenager, however, I started to despise the silliness of those family get-togethers. I remember one occasion in particular when, for reasons known only to adolescents, I sat moping on the sofa in one of those don't-associate-with-anybody moods. As the 'Beer Barrel Polka' began to play, my father came over with outstretched hand. But I glared at him with icy indifference. 'Just leave me alone,' I muttered under my breath. Startled, he turned, and never invaded my privacy again. He danced with my mother, he danced with my sisters, but not with me. 'I'd come home late at night from a date, and he'd be waiting for me in the old chair -- his bathrobe loosely tied at the waist, an opened book in his lap, half asleep. 'What are you doing up?' I'd say. 'Why don't you just go to bed?' He'd look at me with sad, pleading eyes and whisper, 'I was just waiting for you, that's all. I was just waiting for you.'

"I was glad to leave that house when I finally graduated high school. My father and I had a distant, formal relationship, but not much more. Eventually, though, I began to miss what we had once enjoyed, only I wasn't quite sure how to bridge the gap. Until one day, when I happened to be home for a family reunion, and somebody put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' As my father walked across the room, I went up to him with outstretched hand and said, 'Daddy, I believe this is our dance.' He looked at me and smiled, and said, 'I've been waiting for you. I've been waiting for you.' " (adapted from Day1.org)

The God who brought us into being calls us by our names and now waits for us to discover the truth of life and to hear his call to us: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor. We choose whom we will serve, and we choose whether or not we will let our lamps be filled... God waits. "As for me and my household," Joshua proclaimed, "we will serve the Lord." And each of us can also proclaim through our every day: I will serve the Lord by letting my lamp be filled with the oil of obedience, to share the light and love of Christ with all on my path.

God waits. The time is now. The choice is ours. Choose this day and every day whom you will serve. Amen.