



IT TAKES A CHURCH Anticipation

Psalm 77:1-12

TRINITY PULPIT

This notice appeared in the window of a coat store in Nottingham, England: "We have been established for over 100 years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of coal nationalization, coat rationing, government control and bad payers. We have been cussed and discussed, messed about, lied to, held up, robbed and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next." – Unknown

It does seem that in our culture this mood is prevalent. We stay around to see what will happen next, but we sadly seemed convinced that what will happen will not be good. We have to admit that many in our society do not have a positive outlook on the future. They are sticking around just to see what might happen next.

However, I want to submit to you this morning that anticipation is the lifeblood of the people of God. Not just anticipating what might come in regards to our own life experiences, but more than this. God's people throughout the scriptures are filled with anticipation of what God is going to do next. Even in moments when they were sure that God was going to bring judgment because of their sinfulness, they were also convinced that on the other side of judgment were forgiveness, hope and restoration. No matter how dark the moment or how dire the circumstance or how long the despair, there is in God's people a sense of anticipation of what God is going to do.

Paul reminds us with this word of encouragement from 1 Corinthians 2:9

No eye has seen. No ear has heard. No mind has conceived. What God has prepared for those who love Him.

That word of hope creates in those who love

God anticipation. Just what is God going to do? I can't wait to see what happens next!

Jesus' parable of the Ten Virgins is found in a section of teaching in Matthew regarding the end of the age. In chapter 24, Jesus begins to give information about the signs that are to come. These signs are physical markers of theological and spiritual realities. Jesus speaks of false prophets, persecution, the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a time of abomination and rejection of God. Jesus speaks of his coming as a time that is sudden and without warning. It is a time whose hour God only knows the father. Jesus essentially says in Matthew 24 because the end will happen suddenly, without warning, and when people are not looking for it, as God's people we must be prepared. We must live in the anticipation of what is to come.

It is in this setting that Jesus gives three parables as a teaching tool. One is of the talents where we are charged to be faithful with what we are given. The third is the sheep and goats where we are reminded that God has an expectation of us caring for one another and the one who is in need, and to see ourselves as those who are in need.

The first of this parable is our text for today and it is called the parable of the Ten Virgins. It is a story with ancient cultural overtones. We are told there are 10 virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom. Marriage custom of that day was as follows: The Groom would prepare a place for his bride. It might be in his house or a place at his father's house. Then he would go to her father's house to get her. There might be a small party at her house, so there was a small delay. Then the Bride and Groom would return to his father's house for the marriage feast or banquet (which usually lasted for seven days).

The ten young ladies would be somewhere along the route between the bride's house and the groom's house. They are waiting for the bride and groom to return and they hope to



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join the procession and enter with them into the party. If they are with the crowd, they will be able to slip right in. If they aren't with the procession, then the doorkeepers will turn them away because they don't know them. They don't have an invitation.

Jesus describes the 10 virgins as young women who had much in common. They were all in the same community. They were all of young age. They all were somehow connected to the bridegroom. They all were seemingly participating in the marriage custom. They all had lamps. They all went out to greet the bridegroom. In fact, they all also got tired of waiting and fell asleep. However, there was one element that separated the wise from the foolish. The difference was the wise virgins carried with them more oil for their lamps and so when the bridegroom tarried, they were still prepared and ready to join the celebration. The foolish virgins, we are told, were not prepared and so when the bridegroom tarried and they fell asleep and awakened to his coming they were not prepared for that moment.

We are told they asked for the others to share, but the others did not share saying that if they shared there would not be enough for any of them. Now at first that does not sound very Christ like. It is odd for us to hear Jesus tell a story where the wise are those who withhold and do not share. However, the truth is there are some things you cannot ultimately share. As one writer puts it:

Why should the five's irresponsibility render the other five's effectiveness invalid also? There are some things you cannot share, you know. You can't share character or courage or inner peace to someone in a crisis, however much they weep and beg of you. You cannot share the thousands of facts you've learned about God over the years, you cannot share all this in one hour or one week or one year. Such must be bought at the merchants in its own time. There is no crash course in prayer that can make up for years of missed application.- Stephen Crotts-What if the End is Near?

It does seem that both the wise and the foolish virgins do anticipate the coming of the bridegroom, however Jesus' story speaks to us about what anticipation looks like in the Christian life.

Anticipation naturally has waiting involved. How we hate to wait. Have you noticed that if you stand in a line more than 30 seconds at a convenience store the clerk most of the time is apologizing for your wait? We do not like waiting in line for food, tickets, rides, shows, or anything we are prepared to enjoy or consume. Even harder is when we have to wait on others or seasons of

life. It is hard to wait for another to grow, or change their way of thinking or acting. We have a hard time waiting for seasons of life to pass. We are like narrative in the Trace Adkins song where everyone wants to hurry each stage of life and of course the song reminds us:

You're gonna miss this
You're gonna want this back
You're gonna wish these days hadn't gone by so fast
These are some good times
So take a good look around
You may not know it now
But you're gonna miss this

We of course know this sentiment is true, but still we dislike waiting. Preacher Karoline Lewis writes:

Our preaching needs to claim that waiting is simply the reality of life. Not that we should say, "This is how it is, get over it." But that what we choose to utter or how we choose to be in the waiting matters... yes, we want the wait to be over. But, at the same time, we trust that God will show up. God will show up in the midst of any manifestation of our waiting. God will show up to be what we need God to be depending on how we experience the waiting. If our waiting is experienced in fear? God comes with peace. If our waiting is experienced in longing? God arrives with deep and abiding satisfaction. If our waiting is experienced in anticipation? God accompanies us in the joy that should be our present.

Part of the anticipation is the waiting but even in the waiting God is present.

Anticipation means preparation. What separates the two groups in Jesus' parable is five are prepared for the delay and five are not prepared. Again, they all 10 have so much in common. They share almost everything the same but in the end, in the moment that mattered the most, the moment the bridegroom arrives only the five were prepared with the oil they needed. Only five were ready for that moment.

Anticipation is not like a wishing well it is filled with effort and preparation. To anticipate what God is going to do is also to be prepared for what God is going to do.

Have you ever heard Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony*? It's a piece with long serene musical delights that are suddenly intruded upon by a savage theme that shatters all tranquility. That was Tchaikovsky's way of telling us that life flows along placidly, until a crisis like death is thrust upon us. The parables of Jesus have this - cute little stories that suddenly end in crisis.

Life is much like this. It does seem to go along in routine and then there is this moment of crisis, a moment that is pregnant with meaning and if we are not prepared for the moment... we are sent into a panic. We find ourselves like the 5 foolish ones begging for help, reaching for meaning, hoping for some way to be included. All too often the lack of preparation in anticipation leaves us shut out of what God had in store for us. We just miss it.

This time of year is a season for parades and festivals. There was a Christmas parade in central North Carolina a few years ago. Many elaborate floats passed by when suddenly a simple hay wagon pulled by a tractor starts by. On the wagon are several fraternity boys from the university. They are madly sawing boards and nailing things together. The puzzled expressions of the onlooker's faces changed to laughter when they read the sign on the back of the wagon. It read: "We thought the parade was next week."

What the five foolish virgins discovered was when the bridegroom arrived; when the crisis comes it is too late for preparation. Anticipation is filled with waiting, but it is also filled with preparation.

How do we prepare? As individuals we keep filling our lives with that which fuels the light of Christ. There was an old children's song we use to sing growing up that said "Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning. Give me oil in my lamp I pray. Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning, keep me burning till the break of day."

Well that is what we need in the anticipation. We need to be putting oil in our lamps. That is we need to be filling or lives with that which fuels the light of Christ in our lives. Why do we keep coming to church? Let's admit it... sometimes church can be like waiting on a bridegroom. We can become sleepy. It happens. Yet, we keep coming because we know one day we are going to need it. There will be a moment when life comes to a sudden crescendo and in that moment you and I will be pleased that we have filled out lives with God's word. We will delight that we were prepared in that moment.

The same is true in the life of the church. We keep working, we keep reaching out, we keep showing care, we keep encouraging, we keep training leaders, and helping people find their place. We do all this because in the life of every church there comes times of change and

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transition and someone who is prepared must step up and assume a new role. Anticipation means preparation.

Anticipation means hope. Anticipation develops within us a living hope that leads ultimately to celebration.

If you will indulge me just a moment I want to share my experience with my Mom's passing. I know that many of you have had similar moments in life. Many of you have sat with those you love while your loved one lingers between this world and the next. So many of you know what it is like to be there in that moment. I have been

with many people over the years when they took their last breath, but it is different when you are with a parent or spouse or child or best friend. Someone you have shared life with.

Everyone had gone but me and we sat in the dark listening to old hymns. I was humming and singing along so she could hear me. I realized that I knew the words to these old hymns because of her. I had stood between her and my father with my hymnbook open singing since I was a child. Amazing Grace, Great is They

Faithfulness and Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, Tune my heart to sing they praise. ...Prone to wonder Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love... here's my heart Lord take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

That was it... that was the line that spoke to me in that moment. My friends there are moments when nothing but God's promises will do. There are moments when nothing but the presence of Christ will make a difference. There are moments when all we have is what we have in Christ. Now here is the good news.... It is enough. That is what I learned. All my theology, all my reflection on the Bible, all my arguing theological points, all my considerations came down to this "Do you believe in me? Do you trust me?"

When this life passes what we have is this... a living hope. A hope that God's promises are true and anticipation of what God is going to do is what creates that living hope.

There is the old saying that the worst thing that happens to the Christian is never the last thing. That is so true. No matter what our story might be God always has another chapter. There is always a turning of the page. There is always an epilogue for those who trust Jesus. We just keep hoping and wondering what will happen next. We live with anticipation.