

Ready, Set, Wait!

Advent 2020, “What Are We Waiting For?” part 1

Matthew 25:1-13

[SLIDE 1] You are in the right place. By choosing to be in worship right now, you are honoring God and you are blessing us. I want to confirm to you, you have made the right decision. Our goal, together, is to make the most of our time by seeking an encounter with the living God.

Will you pray with me? Dear God, we, your children are gathered here in your name so that you might change the world by changing us. May we encounter you through your Word this morning and see the Light of Christ. O God, I ask that the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14) Amen.

[SLIDES 2] Happy New Year! I know, I know, it’s still 2020, no matter how badly we want to put this year behind us. Still, I have good news for you: today is the first day of the church’s liturgical year. [SLIDE 3] Our church calendar is organized around the life of Christ, starting with the four Sundays before Christmas, which we call Advent. We are beginning an annual cycle that will take us through the New Year, into Lent, Easter and Pentecost, and eventually bring us back around to Advent next year. Don’t worry if that’s all a little confusing. When my mom was a child, she thought every year that Jesus was a baby in December and grew up by April just in time to be crucified and rise again! To her, Jesus kept dying and being born every year. I suppose in a figurative sense, that is what we teach. Still, what really matters is this: we are a church that believes in new beginnings. If you need a new beginning, you are in the right place, because today is the start of our new year in the life of the church. So Happy New Year!

[SLIDE 4] Getting ready for something, whether a new year or just a new week, is not always easy. Have you ever thought you were ready for something, and it turned out that you were not? I did. Early on in college, I took a public speaking class. I started my speech in front of fifteen students, and two minutes into it, my mind went completely blank. I simply froze. All I could do was stutter “ah... ah... ah... ah... ah...” I finally gave up and sat back down at my desk, leaving the rest of the class in shocked silence. The instructor looked at me and asked, “Are you going to finish?” I said, “Nope.” He said, “Then, could you stop by my

office this afternoon?” I was thoroughly embarrassed. However, I learned grace that day: he later told me to practice, and offered me a second chance. And the next time, I was not only ready, I completed the speech.

[SLIDE 5] Advent season is a season of preparation, but for what? Are we simply getting our Christmas lights out, dusting off the Nativity set, and making cookies? No. Then what is this time all about? Advent is all about that truth that Christ will return. So our task is to be ready for him.

[SLIDE 6] The word Advent means “coming” or “appearing”. The truth is, Advent is an in-between-time. We know Jesus came to earth at the first Christmas. We also believe that he will appear at the “end of days”. [SLIDE 7] In Matthew 24:44, Jesus says, “Therefore, be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” The Bible tells us that Jesus will come a second time, not helpless as a baby, but with power and glory. We are in the present, waiting for his return. And as any child will tell you, waiting is the hardest part. How can we be ready for Christ, when we don’t even know when he will come back?

[SLIDE 8] I would propose to you that waiting for Christ is not like waiting for December 25th. We know we have 26 shopping days until Christmas. However, we don’t have an exact countdown for when Christ will come back. And that’s OK. We are not supposed to sit back and speculate. Waiting is the active practice of our faith in the here and now. [SLIDE 9] John the Baptist preached, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 3:2) He did not say it “will be coming.” He said the kingdom is here now. The focus of the church today is to make the presence of Christ known to the world right now, even while we wait for his return. We shouldn’t speculate, we should participate!

[SLIDE 10] As encouragement for us in our waiting, we have the story in Matthew 25 of the ten maidens. As we encounter them, we need to ask ourselves, are we ready for Christ to return?

Some of these women were ready. They prepared. They brought along extra oil for their lamps. These lamps were like bowls with a wick, like our altar candles here in the church. You can tell when our candles are burning low. If they run out of oil, the flames die. Our usher, Randy, knows where to find the bottle of spare oil. Thankfully, he always refills the lights. Similarly, some of the maidens knew enough to bring extra supplies.

[SLIDE 11] The other five maidens were not prepared. They neglected to bring extra oil. They hoped the groom would appear during the day, when lamps weren't necessary. The fun thing about ancient Jewish weddings, however, was that no one really knew when they were going to start. They didn't send out announcements. No one created a Facebook event; no one sent instant messages. One might sit outside all day waiting for a signal, a shout, “This is it! The groom is on his way!” And in Jesus' story, the bridegroom came in the middle of the night. The foolish women had to leave the party and go buy oil, and as a result, they missed the whole thing. The scripture ends with a dire picture. The foolish women are locked out of the party, and Jesus warns his church: [SLIDE 12] “You don't know the day or the hour. Be ready!” (See Matthew 25:13)

You don't have to be a theologically trained pastor to understand the obvious conclusion. We should choose to be like the wise maidens, not the foolish ones. Each of us should prepare every day for Christ's return. The question is, how do we do that?

[SLIDE 13] Some things are easy to prepare for; others, not so much. I feel for Mary and Joseph. I don't care what you do, nothing can truly prepare you for your first child. I mean, Katja and I had diapers and cribs and cradles and clothes and bibs. We had baby showers, we watched videos, we prayed. I even read a book titled “What to expect when your wife is expanding.” Yet none of that made us feel perfectly “ready” when our daughter was born. Until that moment happens, you have no idea what it feels like. Still, our waiting was active preparation. We prepared for our child by living the way we knew best, even though her birth was shrouded in mystery and awe.

[SLIDE 14] On a scale of one to ten, how ready are you for Jesus' return? Did you even know that the Bible teaches he will come back? You do now! So what should we do to be ready? One crucial way to prepare for Jesus is to examine your attitude toward change. Do you know this joke: How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has to want to change. Oh, there are days when I feel like that light bulb! In fact, a friend once challenged me to look into the mirror each day and repeat the phrase “Embrace change”.

[SLIDE 15] Think about the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph embraced change – they traveled to Bethlehem unexpectedly! The shepherds embraced change – they reacted to the angels’ message immediately, leaving their flocks and searching for the Christ child. Their actions revealed that they were ready to suddenly and unexpectedly meet Jesus.

I want to be ready for Jesus to return by the way I live. My call to ministry came as unexpectedly as the shepherds, though slightly less dramatic. I definitely was not looking for it. In a matter of weeks, I went from being an engineer to being a youth minister. God asked me to take an unexpected step into ministry, and I said yes. Being ready is foremost about obedience. God doesn’t call the qualified; God qualifies the called.

[SLIDE 16] Being “ready” is not a feeling. Being ready is a choice: an active choice to embrace change. To prepare for Christ, we need to practice active waiting.

So what does active waiting look like? When my family moved, we did not feel “ready”, but we were actively waiting...packing, cleaning, removing unnecessary stuff from our house and our lives. Our waiting was exhausting, because we had so much to do! We didn’t just stare out the window, wondering when the moving truck would be there. Actually, once when we thought we were going to move, the company called and said they’d be one day late. They weren’t ready! On the day that they did come, we finally put our plan into action and moved.

[SLIDE 17] Be ready for Jesus is like that. You need a plan, even if the date is not certain. What is your plan to be ready this Christmas? Face it: Christmas is filled with temptation to be selfish and greedy, to think of only ourselves. Our consumerist culture bombards us with messages: “Buy, buy, buy. Get, get, get.” However, actively waiting for the return of Christ means obeying his commands right now. Putting others first. Loving our enemies. Giving to those in need. Doing for the least of these what we would do for Jesus. Our waiting, in reality, needs to be shown in our serving. That’s why we do things like fill shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child, or work with Little Brother’s Friends of the Elderly to make Christmas baskets and serve holiday take-out meals. Serving the others, especially the poor, gets us ready to receive Jesus.

We serve the least because of Jesus’ example. In Luke 12:35-37, Christ portrays himself as a king who comes home to wait on his servants. That is the opposite of what we expect. A king usually waits for others to serve him. Not Jesus. Jesus portrays himself as the servant, the waiter. He shows us what active waiting is all about. By serving others, we prepare for Christ’s return and we follow his example. We become ready.

Let me close with three thoughts on being ready this Advent. I challenge you to do all three things so that you can honestly say, every day, that you are ready for Jesus.

[SLIDE 18] #1 – Get right with God. Take the time to honestly and openly come before God and say, “Here I am. I’m ready.” Receive his forgiveness. With all my heart, I want to tell you, opening up your life to what God has for you is the best way to get ready for Christmas. Get your nose in the Bible. Do an Advent Study. Grab an Upper Room devotion. Do anything you can to connect with God.

[SLIDE 19] #2 – Get right with your neighbor. Maybe that literally means you walk down your street and knock on the door. Or, maybe in a broader sense, you reconcile with your friends, your family, or another relationship in your life that needs healing. Maybe you need to be the one who asks to be forgiven. Christmas is the perfect reason to get right with God and your neighbor.

[SLIDE 20] #3 – Find a way to serve others. Especially those from whom you can expect nothing in return. Instead of buying presents for yourself, give to an organization like Compassion or World Vision or the food pantry. Joyfully, actively wait by participating in God’s work in the world around us. When you open your heart to God and ask, “How can I serve?” God will show you an abundance of ways.

[SLIDE 21] Are you ready? Really ready? Then what are you waiting for? Remember that waiting is active. When we actively practice our faith, we are ready for change, because we are ready for Jesus.

Finish with Nancy C. Townley’s litany (ministrymatters.com)

Memory Verse: Matthew 25:13 (CEV)

“So, my disciples, always be ready! You don't know the day or the time when all this will happen.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Recall a time when you thought you were ready for something, and then felt unprepared. What was that like?
2. What does the imminent return of Christ mean to you? How does it affect your life?
3. In what ways do you daily prepare to see Jesus again?
4. Why did Jesus insist on serving others instead of being pampered as a king?
5. Make one resolution this Christmas to get right with God, your neighbor, and serve others.