

August 7, 2022 Proper 14  
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

**What We Are Waiting For**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

How are you at waiting? Is waiting something you do well, or have very little patience for? I know people for whom waiting causes a great deal of stress, anxiety, and restlessness. For them waiting can feel like a waste of time or a punishment. Others impress me with their ability to practice waiting as an opportunity to rest or be present in the moment and place they are in. For them, waiting can be joyful.

How we wait might depend on what we are waiting for. There is a different between waiting in line at a store, waiting for results of a medical test, and waiting for a beloved and happily anticipated guest to arrive, or for the date of an event like a holiday, trip, or vacation.

Sometimes the wait can be long. I have shared how I waited until I was 38 years old to get married because I was waiting for the right person, meaning the person I fell in love with, who loved me, and who wanted to share the adventure of life as a priest with me. Even though I had not met Michael until two or three years before we were married, I believed he was going to come into my life. Many of my friends and family thought I was foolish to wait. Some thought I should have settled for someone who seemed to love me, even though I didn't love them. Others, like my father, didn't think I'd ever get married. Despite what anyone else believed, I waited. And my waiting wasn't an act of despair, it was an expression of hope.

This waiting wasn't always optimistic. It wasn't always easy. It was lonely at times. It made me different in the eyes of society, and sometimes made me feel excluded. Some dioceses and parishes either refused to interview me to serve as rector because I was single, or if they did, asked me incredibly personal questions about my sexuality and my single status. Yet, despite the challenges, the loneliness, and discrimination, I waited. This waiting was not passive. I prayed, I reflected on what I needed in a spouse, what kind of relationship I wanted, and what I could and could not give. I lived a full life. I had happy moments, accomplishments, and never believed I was anything less while I waited. I found friends who supported me and helped by waiting with me. All this waiting made my engagement announcement and our wedding truly joyful, as many saw something holy at work in our relationship.

Waiting certainly seems to be what today's Gospel and Letter to the Hebrews is about. Waiting is a major theme in the Bible, not waiting for your turn in line at the grocery store, or waiting for test results, although we could make that kind of waiting into the practice of waiting the Bible talks about. In the Bible, as we heard in today's Hebrews lesson, waiting is an act of faith. It is waiting for God to fulfill God's promises, even when those promises seem ridiculous or impossible.

Like Abraham and Sarah, after they had reached old age, having a child that will lead to a people too many to count. Such a promise means God doesn't put limits on people because of age or ability. Such a promise also means the people God made the promise to, Abraham and Sarah, would not live long enough to see it come to fruition. All they could do was wait for it and try to raise their offspring to believe and wait. By waiting, living, doing what they need to survive, caring for each other, worshiping and showing what it is to be God's people in the world, through their waiting God acted and God's promise eventually came to fruition.

This brings us to today's Gospel where Jesus was teaching about the same kind of waiting. The promise Jesus was talking about is God's promise to bring God's Kingdom to earth, to transform the kingdoms of humanity into the dream God has for God's creation where all life – that means all people too -- is an expression of God's love by loving God and each other. It's a kingdom without the violence of murder, a kingdom without the hierarchy of powerful, it's a kingdom without hoarding money or toilet paper, which means it is also a kingdom without charity, because there will not be a need for charity. It is a kingdom where all people respect the dignity of each other, and all of creation without exploitation. It's a world of sharing, not consuming. It can be difficult for us to imagine the world like that because that is a world of love, forgiveness, and mercy. Where everything from health care to education to food, clothing, and shelter will be available to everyone with no debt and no concern for corporate profit. There is no place for greed in God's Kingdom, nor any of greed's siblings like racism, supremacy, sexism, ageism, wealth, consumerism, or all the other ways we try to put each other in a hierarchy of our making. It's a kingdom like the Psalms and prophets describe -- a Peaceable Kingdom where God is fully present with people and people are present with God and will work together to create and sustain such a world. It's a relational, connected, communal kingdom.

This is the kingdom Jesus proclaimed came near when he walked the earth. Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection started the process of God's Kingdom coming to earth, and it is the kingdom that will fully come to the world when Jesus returns. This was a central theme of Jesus' preaching, so much so that scholars

say the members of the early church, those first followers of Jesus, believed he was going to be returning and God's kingdom would be realized before the end of their lives. But, like Abraham and Sarah before them, as time went on, they began to realize that isn't how God works. God rarely acts in the timelines we prefer. They believed Jesus is coming, but they did not know when. So, they did the most faithful thing they could: they waited.

I'm sure that meant they witnessed and probably suffered injustices and violence and discrimination. But through their faith and waiting, they were able, as Jesus said in today's Gospel, to store up heavenly treasures, which helped them endure and they passed on to those who came after them. We often hear this passage of scripture on Thanksgiving when we it is suggested this scripture means to be generous with our material possessions. And that is not a wrong interpretation. I also believe this passage is about how to wait without fear and anxiety by working to store up the kind of treasure that is part of God's Kingdom.

If God's Kingdom is not about consuming, then treasure is not material. It is not a big bank account or box full of expensive jewels or an expensive car or expensive house or a huge church building with elaborate stained-glass windows, altars, and art. Treasure in God's kingdom is the stuff of relationship, like Jesus showed in his life. It is all the practices that help us feel closer to God and each other, praying, listening, sharing, forgiving, and waiting together as we work to do what we can to help make God's kingdom a little closer. It is not easy to believe in something you cannot touch or see, but if we pay attention, as Jesus says in today's Gospel, and if we know what to look for, we will recognize when God's Kingdom does appear. I've seen God's kingdom come when the victims of the shooting at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina forgave the man who killed their pastor and several members. They didn't forgive him because they agreed with his actions. Far from it. They forgave him because that is how healing happens, and how they could move forward without vengeance that would only perpetuate more violence. Ten years ago, I saw another expression of God's Kingdom come when people of many faiths in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area came together to pray and hold vigils for the victims of a shooting at the Sikh Temple in nearby Oak Creek. In the wake of the tragedy, which was motivated by white supremacy, people all over the world contributed support to survivors. One survivor became a politician and advocates for gun control and works to pass legislation intended to eliminate hate crimes. Two completely different examples from my own life are the medical care team, friends, and many of you who worked with me during the long days of recovery from two hip replacement surgeries, and the friends who waited with me while I waited for the person I wanted to marry to come into my life.

These Kingdom of God moments make me wonder if one of the things the Holy Spirit may be calling the Church to in these anxious days where so many struggle with waiting, or where difficulty and whatever is disliked is thrown away without thought or care for others, is to help show the world how waiting can be a life-giving act of faith. For example, every time a public official says they will pray for victims, there is an outcry on social media that prayer is a waste of time. This is of course intended to be a specific criticism of elected officials, but it is expressed as a generality that diminishes the important act of waiting. It is also, perhaps in a back handed way, a reason why humanity needs Jesus to return and God's kingdom to come. Because try as we might, humanity not been successful in creating such a kingdom on our own.

We as a church can remind the world we are waiting for Jesus and a different kind of kingdom, even if we are criticized or called foolish for believing in it. Even though we don't know when this will happen, even when we see acts of injustice and violence, we practice our faith by waiting for God's kingdom to come, by trying to live as if it was already here. We can do this through those acts that accumulate the kind of treasure that is of God's Kingdom: praying, studying, waiting with each other, paying attention for those moments when we recognize "God's hand at work in the world about us", listening for the Holy Spirit and continuing to do what we can to show a little bit of God's holy, healing, forgiving, hopeful love in our community. Sometimes that love is a free mask during the pandemic, offering a place to rest or where someone can grieve in a world that eschews both, paying for a cup of coffee or tea not for yourself, but so someone else can experience a bit of grace, praying or holding our worship service on our front porch so passersby can see a different kind of prayer and expression of Christianity. These and many other ways are how we wait with the world by showing the world there can be joy because of what we are waiting for: God's kingdom, that God is waiting to give to us.