

“What Matters Most When You Are Waiting”

based on Joshua 24:1-25, Amos 5:18-24, Matthew 25:1-13

Delivered on November 8, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Waiting. In all three of these texts there is an element of waiting.

The people of Israel waited and waited and waited for their chance to enter the promised land. You see, when Joshua was young and he was sent as one of the spies to go see the land and if it could be taken over, he and Caleb were the only ones with confidence in the Lord, that they could do it. And so, God made the people wait. That whole generation would die off before they would enter the land. Even Moses died before they entered the promised land.

Here is Joshua, the successor of Moses and the people have waited. They're finally mostly in the land. He asks them then to renew their covenant with God. He tells them the salvation history of all that God has done for the people. Then he says in that famous line we like to put on signs in our houses and you put it on the plaque outside the manse, 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.'

The people want to serve the Lord. But these are descendants of the people who struggled with Moses and wanted to return to slavery in Egypt. Even though that generation died off and these are their descendants, Joshua knows that people are people. You cannot serve the Lord, he says. And so they insist, 'Yes, yes we can!' And so Joshua makes the covenant with them. They have been waiting and waiting to live in the land that God had promised them, and they truly and earnestly desire to serve the God who brought them there.

But you will notice in reading it, they had to put away the idols. They still had those idols. We today are waiting. We are waiting for this COVID-19 pandemic to end. In a microcosm, we were waiting this week, wondering how long it would take for election results to come. I saw a Facebook post this week that said, 'Why should we be surprised that we are in the longest election day in history, when we are still in the longest March in history?' It feels like we are waiting still.

We are coming up on the season of Advent, which is a season of waiting. The church calendar brings us from waiting to realization of God's intervention to revelation and then back to waiting, realization and revelation and then into this time of Ordinary time, where we reflect. But it feels like we've never gotten to that realization point.

Easter came and passed, and I remember telling you all that we would hold on to our palms and keep them in the fridge, because this summer when we're allowed to return to worship. We were going to have Palm Sunday 2.0. And here we are, palms still on ice, waiting. Waiting. We will have a small contingent here to start Advent, but it would be weird to re-celebrate Palm

Sunday on the first week of Advent, so we won't. We will continue to wait and enter into that season of waiting for the Lord.

In the reading from Amos, the people were waiting for the day of the Lord. We can tell from the text that the leaders believe that they are secure. They are still doing their festivals and their solemn rites and their sacrifices and all those public displays of religiosity. But that is not what God wants. God says to let justice roll like waters and let righteousness be like an ever-flowing stream. The day of the Lord could be seen as something like the day of Jubilee when all debts will be erased and the people are waiting for that. They believe they are the debtors, who will be repaid.

But Amos tells them that it will not be good for them. The justice and righteousness of God will bring a dark day for them. These leaders in the Kingdom of Israel are exploiting the poor and the marginalized. In the next few verses after what we read, it talks about them still serving those other idols, the ones that were packed away. He talks about them lounging on ivory couches with the finest foods and drink, while the country is ruin. They think that they are doing enough.

Then we come to the bridesmaids. We have 10 bridesmaids who appear to have been called to serve, to lead a part of the wedding celebration. They are there. Their lamps are lit. They are waiting and waiting and waiting. They fall asleep. The bridegroom is delayed. When they wake up, they trim their lamps, they cut the wick to make sure the flame goes strong again.

Still, the foolish ones say their lamps are going out. They had enough oil to burn until this moment, but now they have no more oil left. They ask the wise for oil, but they cannot give it because then they will not have enough oil. The bridegroom is not yet there. And so they need to be prepared if he's delayed again. So, the five go off to buy new oil and by the time they get back, they are shut out from the wedding banquet.

Here they were, part of the wedding party and now they are denied entry. It seems a bit harsh that these people who seemed to have been chosen and called are left out. It's not their fault the groom was late. If the groom had arrived earlier, they would have had all the oil they needed. And so, Jesus warns us all to stay awake.

What do we do while we wait? If in this time of waiting, we just say everything is fine, we've already accomplished what needs to be accomplished, then we rest not on our faithfulness to God, but we rest on our works. It's kind of interesting here, because I really think that this reading points to being saved by grace through faith.

All three of them talk about this in some way, including our Old Testament passages. They are pointing to not relying on something we have done to be that which pleases God. They are pointing to people who have been waiting and sure, they have made it to this point to get to the

promised land, but they renew their commitment. They know that they will fail. I'm sure Joshua is not the only one who believes they're not going to do it. But scholars believe this became an annual tradition to renew the covenant in this way. They were trying. They didn't rest on where they were.

Then Amos is criticizing those who do rest on where they were. He says, you thought you had done enough, but this reveals where your love is. We are saved by grace through faith, but what faith do we have if it is dead without works? The works are not what we do to earn a 'heaven' or the new creation and salvation. They are the proof that we have the faith we say that we do. They are the response. God loved us first.

You see, Abraham was promised to be a light to all nations. But his descendants could not do it. We today are descendants by faith, and we struggle to attain the glory of God. We all fall short of it. But God did not leave us to ourselves. God entered into our human condition, sharing in our humanity, to live as we live, to die for us on that Roman cross like a slave or a rebel. He took upon himself all of our sin and all that this world's greatest power of empire could muster against him. Even death. He bore it on that cross for us and our salvation. Then on the third day he rose again, showing us that sin and death are defeated and the new creation is real. He is the firstborn of it.

Friends that love is meant to inspire us to love one another and to love God in return. We love because He loved us first. It is our opportunity and privilege to not rest on this, but to share in the work of our Lord. We don't rest on the salvation God gives us as though we did something to earn it and boast of it. Instead, we join in reconciling all things to Christ.

As we wait, what matters most? How we reflect God and God's love to those we encounter is critical in this time more than ever. The world is broken. It always has been. So much is better, but now, we are in a new phase of damage and despair, of division and hate. We have an opportunity as Christians to either assume that what we have done is enough, or to be prepared and fill our flasks with oil, so that no matter how long we are waiting, we are able to shine brightly and lead the way for our bridegroom, the Lord Jesus on his return.

I told you several times that there are valid Christian reasons to vote for either candidate. I stand by that. There is no such thing as the Christian candidate. But there is such a thing as God being in sovereign control. There is an opportunity for us to be a part of God's work to reconcile all things and make this world a better place, so that when God's justice rolls down like water, our acts of justice are preserved and we are not washed away along with our sins. We can be a part so that when righteousness comes to flow like an ever-flowing stream, our acts of love stand up and are preserved in the new creation.

Friends, I hope that you have prayerfully considered who you would vote for, before you voted. But I want you to know that that action of voting is not something to rest on to say, I did my

part, it's all over now. Instead, we must look to what God put on our hearts for why we voted the way we voted, and not assume that it's all over. We must continue to work for justice and righteousness—for women and minorities, for the unborn, for all who struggle in this world, for those who feel left out of the process, for those who are fearful or have been fearful for what the sin of this world might do to them.

Friends, we cannot give in like Israel and Judah and just act like 'well, we're Christians and we've done our thing, so that's enough,' and then look just like the rest of the world. At the start of the book of Amos, he lists out all the pagan nations and empires around them and their failings, and then tells Israel and Judah they have the same ones.

So the good news is that you don't have to do anything to earn your salvation. God has done that for you by sharing in your humanity to live, die and rise again for you. Be grateful. Respond to that. Because if we truly believe that good news, that it is good news, then how we live should reflect it. Amen.

From the charge at the end of the service: Friends we wait and we continue to wait, but God is at work in the waiting. If you're happy with the outcome of this past week, don't gloat, but reach out a hand to those who disagree with you. And if you're upset, don't lash out, but reach out a hand to those who disagree with you. Let us be dignified with love for one another. God sees our social media feeds and God sees the social media feed of our hearts.

We must hold our thoughts captive to the Word of God and hold them captive to this idea of loving God with all we have and loving our neighbor as ourselves. So, be faithful as Jesus was faithful and be distinct from this world, which doesn't value that kind of love for enemy, love for those you disagree with. It doesn't. We see that in this world we live under a tyranny of now, of winners and losers, but God is calling you and saying, not yet. We are still in a time of waiting. You will be with me. Stay faithful and stay strong. Amen.