

Still Waiting

Psalm 70

Matthew 25:1-13

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Psalm 70

Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me!

Let those be put to shame and confusion who seek my life. Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire to hurt me.

Let those who say, "Aha, Aha!" turn back because of their shame.

Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. Let those who love your salvation say evermore, "God is great!"

But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay!

Matthew 25: 1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

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Waiting. We spend our lives waiting for things yet it is always a hard thing to do. It can be frustrating, unsettling, exciting, anxiety-provoking, patience-testing, curiosity-teasing to live in an in-between time. It's limbo. It's a holding pattern. Big things, little things. Things we are excited about, things we are dreading, even a simple thing like a bus or a package delivery. It seems there's always something to keep us waiting.

April 19. My first baby's due date. Everything was ready. Everyone was ready. There was nothing left to do but to wait. April 20, then all the 20s, then May 1, 2, 3. Still waiting. I told everyone these extra days were longer than the nine months of pregnancy. Extended family members called to ask if we had the baby yet and somehow had forgotten to tell them. No, we're still waiting.

We sat by the phone waiting to hear the results of my mom's lung biopsy. In reality we knew what we would hear, but waiting to hear the actual words was tense and surreal. At least in our waiting there was still a tiny drop of hope that the test was negative. The limbo was a cocoon of wishful thinking yet even then there was an anxiety to confirm what we already knew and then could act on it. Hours felt like days and we were still waiting.

Yet another rejection letter from a publisher, but I have not given up. I'm still waiting to find the publisher who sees the benefit of '*Always with You*,' for their readers, for their publishing agency. It's a cycle of optimism and pessimism, of thick packets sent out and a thin envelope in response. I could wallpaper a small area with my collection of 'no thank you, not for us,' form letters, but I will keep on waiting. Six publishers, but seven is my lucky number.

I admit that some of this waiting is handled with patient grace, but certainly not all. That is probably true for you as well. It is hard to sit back and not be in control and for an unknown amount of time and an uncertain outcome.

We can certainly understand our faith ancestors who recited the words of Psalm 70 as their memorial offering when they could find no words of their own to express their heartfelt woes and desires.

Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me! But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay!

Urgency. Impatience. Now. The psalmist made it clear he is begging God to help him right now. O Lord, make haste to help me! Hasten to me, O God! O Lord do not delay! We can hear, we can feel the tension, the need for immediate divine assistance, for a divine act of justice, a reversal of fortunes. But it's not here yet.

We don't know the circumstances that the psalmist is in but we have all had personal times of heartbreak and anxiety and fear and worry when these words are our own prayer and plea, when waiting for an answer, for relief, for help. We watch the news and the message of this psalm is the spirit in our prayers. The ancient words still echo as we pray for God to hasten, to deliver, to help, the people of Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, Haiti, Nepal, to turn swords into plowshares, to find a way to stop the epidemic of gun violence in our country, to heal our fractured world, to resolve our immigration and border chaos, to bring the light of justice into the places of darkest injustice, to renew our abused creation, for our veterans to receive the homes and all the care they need, for care for our loved ones in a time of distress and crisis. Yet we are still waiting.

The hard and complicated parable of the ten bridesmaids challenges us to be introspective and honest with how we wait, because we will indeed continue to wait. Will we be wise, and prepared? Will we be foolish and unprepared? Will we be awake and paying attention or will we be sound asleep? But the answer is not an either/or because this is a complex parable with certainly more questions than answers. How do we wait for something that is seemingly way over due, something we're doubtful will even come during our lifetime? How do we wait with active preparation when we're not even sure what we should be preparing for? The kind of ultimate waiting that Jesus is talking about in Matthew's gospel is not the kind of waiting we know in any other aspect of our life, but our many and varied experiences can give us insight, and keep us mindful, keep us awake, keep us paying attention.

And into this waiting I have a long unanswered and probably unanswerable question—are we waiting for God just as much as God might be waiting for us? We can be impatient, anxious in our waiting—our waiting for anything—but God is completely the opposite. God is patient with us generation after generation, with the ways we treat one another because of faith or fear, with the ways we fight over land and possessions, with the ways we cruelly judge those who are not us, with the ways we use power to exploit rather than to be equal, with the ways we continue to trample God's good earth, with the ways we give lip service to Jesus' teaching but neglect to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our might, with the ways we hoard the oil for our lamps and refuse to share assuming there is not enough for all. God is still patiently waiting.

UCC pastor, author and theologian Bruce Epperlyⁱ helps me, helps us, to sit with that question of who is waiting for who. He says since we do not know when the bridegroom will come, we never know when we will be called upon to respond to God's call. The vagueness of Messianic appearances is good, rather than bad, news. Vagueness inspires us to see every encounter as holy, an opportunity to love God by loving God's children. God is always coming to us: we don't have to wait for a God-directed end-times scenario to experience God's presence. God's coming into our lives awakens our charity for others, even those who are ill-prepared for divine visitations. Faithfulness to the wisdom of God found in our faith is life-transforming. Following the One God may be the greatest inspiration to look beyond our own ego-interests, mean-spirited patriotisms and ideologies, to seek the well-being of God's creation and humankind in all times and places.

God is still waiting. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2023/11/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-twenty-fourth-sunday-after-pentecost-november-12-2023/>