

“Daddy, Are We There Yet?”

Nov. 30, 2008

Rev. David C. Huffman

Mk.13:24-37

Most of us hate to wait. We live in a time of instant gratification, credit cards, and fast food. And you see where this has gotten us. I remember back in the fifties, (what I call BFF: before fast food), when my family would load up our 59 Chevy station wagon and head to the beach on vacation. Not only did we pack our suitcases, pillows, beach chairs, and the family dog; we also packed a lunch that we would eat at a road side picnic table half way to Myrtle Beach. Remember those? That is where my mother would take out the home made friend chicken, potato salad, deviled eggs, and pound cake for us to eat lunch. The only other alternative in those days was to stop at a sit-down restaurant, but that would take too much time and money.

The point I want to make is that before we got to Pittsboro, which was about 30 miles from Burlington, one of my sisters or I would shout from the back seat, “Are we there yet, Daddy?” I see you’ve taken the same trip.

I

If patience is a virtue, then most of us have long way to go before we reach the land of Virtue. Children want to be teenagers; teenagers want to be adults; and adults want to be rich and famous far before we are ready for that. Apparently, a lot of people want to buy a home before they can afford one. And unfortunately the lenders have allowed them to do that in the past few years. We come to church and hear that patience is a virtue and we go home and pray, “Lord, make be patient and be quick about it!” We hate to wait. Do you switch lines at the checkout area in the stores when the line next to you goes faster? Do you travel in the right hand lane or the passing lane on the highway? Do you get a little ticked off when someone passes you on the highway?

Advent is all about waiting: waiting for God to send the Messiah into the world to make everything alright. Hope is a strong human urge. Barack Obama ran his campaign on the audacity of hope, and he will be our next president. I don’t envy his job. He will preside over 300,000,000 impatient people who want everything now! Someone said last week that expectations are high for our president elect. They see him as a combination of the Messiah and Moses. That’s a tall order! In the Old Testament, God’s people had been waiting for over 500

years for God to deliver on his promise to send a Messiah to liberate his people and restore them to their former glory. Five hundred years! Heck, we expect Secretary of the Treasury, Pat Paulson, to fix the worst recession in 80 years in just 60 days!

Hope deferred can lead to resignation and despair. When God finally sent Cyrus the Great to free the Jewish exiles from Babylon, some of them chose to stay. They had grown so accustomed to slavery, that their hope for a better life had been extinguished. So they stayed, while the rest of their people went back to Israel.

Our parable this morning is about waiting and working while the master is away on a long trip. The point of this parable is fairly clear: the servants put in charge of the household did not know when the master would return. Therefore, everyone needed to be busy doing their jobs every hour of the day, lest the master return unannounced and find them asleep on the job. Notice that only one of the servants was designated as doorkeeper. His job was to watch for anyone coming, including the master. Everyone else had been assigned a job to keep the household running while the master was away. (health dept. policy)

Jesus concluded this parable by warning the disciples to remain awake and alert, to watch. For what? Actually, Jesus was talking about the end of the world, the end of time as we know it. He meant the Second Coming when the Son of Man would come on the clouds and in his glory to rescue God's people from their distress. In other gospels, the end of time is associated with two great actions. One, the Son of Man will return to judge and punish the wicked and two, to redeem and rescue God's people, to whom Mark refers as the elect in our passage today. But Mark refers only to blessings for God's people; he says nothing about judgment or punishment.

Jesus said that no one, not even he, knew when the end of time would come; only God. We could get into a long discussion about how if Jesus was God then why didn't he know what the Father knew? Suffice it to say that Jesus said he didn't know, and that's good enough for me. And if he didn't know, why should any human being presume to know when?

But throughout church history, groups of well intentioned but wrong headed Christians have quit their jobs and gathered on a hill staring into the sky waiting for the Second Coming, convinced that they have discerned what Jesus himself didn't know. The first people to do this were the Christians at Thessalonica, the ones Paul wrote a nasty letter to telling them to get back to work and saying "if you don't work, you don't eat!"

Even today, millions of Christians seem preoccupied with figuring out the day and the hour of the end of the world, even though Jesus said not to do that. They seem to be concerned more with heaven than with life in this world, ignoring the biblical view that God created the earth as our home and told us to fill the earth and multiply and to glorify and enjoy God forever. Our mission on earth should not be marking time, but living and loving the way God created us. This world is not a holding tank or a waiting room for heaven. It is the main act -- at least for now. If God wanted us to live in heaven with from the beginning, he wouldn't have created Earth. This is our home – for now. It will not last forever. But God's love will. It begins here and now in this world and lasts forever, in the world to come. In the meantime, heaven can wait. Our job is here.

II

The purpose of life is not getting to heaven. Loving God and neighbor is our purpose in life: to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus even throws in the ringer of loving our enemies, although we don't like to talk about that one. We like to think Jesus was having a bad day when he said that, having had a lapse into idealism and naiveté. So, Advent is the season of waiting and watching, preparing for the celebration of the birth of Christ. It is the time we rediscover the truth of the Gospel that God does not leave us alone in the universe. God has come near to live among us, to be with us: Emmanuel. This is the good news of Advent and Christmas.

The concept of Santa Claus is cut from the same cloth, but it is only a piece of the Messianic hope. What better story than a jolly old man in a red suit who comes down the chimney once a year to place free gifts under the tree for our enjoyment! Works for me! But we must realize that this only a piece of the cloth, not the whole bolt. The rest of story informs us that God doesn't visit us just once a year; he moves into the spare room of our soul and takes up residency, 365 days a year. And the gifts he brings are grace, forgiveness, and new life – gifts that are far more significant than our Christmas list.

When Jesus told his disciples to follow him, he didn't mean follow him up into the clouds. He told them to work with him on his three year earthly ministry, and then after he rose from the dead, he told them to wait in Jerusalem until God sent the Holy Spirit who would inspire and empower them to continue Christ's ministry in the world in his absence: to feed the hungry, to heal the sick to visit prisoners, to preach good news to the poor and freedom for the

oppressed. That is our assignment too. Waiting and watching does not mean quitting our jobs and sitting on a hill waiting for Jesus to return.

III

Jesus warned us in the passage just before today's lesson to beware of false Messiahs, people who come posing as a Messiah whose intent was not to save us but to dupe us. The first century was ripe for this kind of charlatan. No one knew who the Messiah would look like or when he would come. Truth be told, many had given up all hope and others were easy marks, they were so desperate for a Messiah. Martin Copenhaver writes that there are two types of waiting, passive waiting and active waiting. Passive waiting is waiting for the winter months to pass so fishing season will get here in the spring. Active waiting is standing in the water in your hip boots casting your fly rod over your favorite fishing hole, waiting for that fish to bite. That's active waiting.

Passive waiting is standing on a street corner at a bus stop waiting for the next bus to come. Active waiting is a kid standing on the same street corner waiting for the Christmas parade to arrive. There is a difference between passive and active waiting (Martin Copenhaver, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 22, WJKP, 2008). Lillian Daniel says that "Christians should be like a waiter in a restaurant, who, rather than sitting around, is continually busy in serving others and has no time to sit down and count the tips" (*Feasting on the Word*, p. 21, WJKP, 2008).

We could use a wake up call. Like the person who lived in a house by the railroad tracks, who no longer hears the trains go by, we who come to church every Sunday may no longer pay much attention to Advent with its color, pageantry, and rituals that might catch the attention of newcomers more than ours (*Ibid*). Yes, we have miles to go before we sleep on Christmas Eve: the shopping, the baking, the decorating, the wrapping – the shopping. But Advent is more than this. It is not a passive waiting for another Christmas to come and go. It is supposed to be an active waiting when we get excited about the Christmas parade that is on its way with Jesus riding in the last float.

In colonial New England a meeting of legislators was halted by a sudden solar eclipse – causing panic and a request for adjournment. But someone said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought in." (Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation*, JKP, 1983)

“Daddy, are we there yet?” “Not quite; not quite. You just go on doing what you were doing, and before you know it we’ll be there. Yes, we will. Let us prepare to come to the table. Let us pray.