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Henry Memorial Church, Dublin, GA
November 12, 2006

WAITING ON GOD

Prayer for Illumination:

Present God,
 quiet our hearts,
 still our minds,
 open our eyes
 and stir our imaginations
 that we might hear your word for us today.

Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Hebrews 9:24-28

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Waiting. We wait for the phone to ring, for the mailman to come, for the promotion we know we deserve. We wait for the baby to be born, for the child to grow up, for the loved one to die. We wait at traffic lights, in lines at the bank, for the next available cashier at the check out.

We wait with minds and hearts swirling with thoughts: what's next on the to-do list, how will we ever get it all done, how will we manage after that happens, why does time pass so slowly in one season and fly by in the next?

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We wait.

We even have a whole season in the church set aside for waiting. We wait for the Christ child to be born. We wait for the presents and the tree, for the family and the feast. We might even wait later in the year: holding our breath through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, waiting on eggshells for the resurrection to be proclaimed once again.

Yet, I wonder how many of us eagerly await the coming of the Lord as the writer of Hebrews suggests we might. Jesus will come again, the writer affirms, not to judge sin, but to save those who are eagerly awaiting for him. Are we really waiting for that? Are we really waiting on Jesus to show up again?

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I grew up in a church that didn't talk much about the second coming. We were too liberal, too northern to engage in such fanciful fairy tales.

We talked instead about Jesus' life: the ways he engaged in social justice, the ways he fought the powers and principalities, the ways he welcomed the outcasts and loved the sinners. We talked about his actions and his deeds: what they might look like in our context, in our time; but we certainly didn't expect (or wait for) Jesus to walk through the front doors and do it again – it was up to us to carry on his tradition.

As a teenager, this made perfect sense to me. When I read the letters Paul and others wrote immediately following Jesus' death and resurrection, they talked about Jesus showing up again before they died. But that was two thousand years ago and we have not seen Jesus back since. So it seemed rational, reasonable, to assume someone had gotten wrong down the line. I figured if we were to see Jesus again it would happen when we died.

In the meantime, as I understood it, it was up to us to make a difference.

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The story from Mark that we read this morning showed me one way, as an eager teenager, to do just that: to make a difference, to distinguish between a good, productive, true Christian life, and a false, only for show, no real substance Christian life.

Jesus is with the disciples in the Temple. They see the scribes, walking around in long robes, praying with enviable devotion, clearly members of the chosen tribe. And they see a poor woman, putting only a penny into the offering plate.

At first I thought this was a simple story – an easy contrast between religious leaders who were giving the best of their devotion and prayers and a poor woman who could only afford a penny. But Jesus' words, as they always seem to, flipped the meaning as I continued to read this story in

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my teenage years. Rather than praising the scribes and their devotion, Jesus warns the disciples not to be deceived by their false piety; their actions, he insist devour the poor and the widowed – they care more about appearances than about justice. Instead, Jesus lifts up the poor woman – the one who gave only a penny, saying, ‘look at this woman, she gave all she had.’

And I thought ‘ah-ha! God likes the poor more than God likes prayers: I know now what I’m supposed to do.’ Actions will be better than words – I need to help the poor. And so I did. Or I tried. I volunteered at Community Centers, I minored in international development, I donated money and goods and time. I went to Seminary and became chair of the outreach committee. And nothing ever seemed to change.

In fact, the more I became involved in helping others, the more I became aware of the need. As many nights as I stayed at shelters, there were still always men and women and children who couldn’t get in, didn’t have a warm, dry place to spend the night. As much as I studied solutions to poverty in my classes, there was always a flaw, and often the attempts to help on a larger scale only made things worse.

It was frustrating. And defeating. Overwhelming and deafening. There simply was too much need and not enough time and money in my possession to make it better. I remember trying to write a sermon about God’s power and glory and not being able to get past all the disasters in the world, all the need; and wondering if I really believed in God’s power and glory when things seemed only to get worse.

There are, I think, two ways forward when one gets stuck in the overwhelming awareness of all the need in the world. The first is to affirm, rightly, that one person can and does make a difference. The widow with the penny made a difference. Not only did her small contribution add to the treasury, but it made a difference in her life as her priorities were aligned in this specific way, and it made a difference for the disciples and those who were watching: her example offered inspiration to others wrestling with how to give and how to live. It was Mother Teresa who said we can do no great things, only small things with great love. David James Duncan, a writer from Montana points out that this means she effectively ignored the hundreds of thousands who were starving and sick and homeless. Yet, her small acts created a movement that could not fail but to make a difference for the hundreds of thousands – one person at a time.

The other way forward, as a Christian, is this notion of the kingdom of God and a second coming. As a northerner, and a liberal, I still shift a little uncomfortably in my seat when this language emerges and I’m more than a little anxious as to what preaching about it says about me. But the idea is appealing and full of hope and it seems to name what we experience: namely that we can’t do it ourselves, but shouldn’t stop trying.

The Kingdom of God defies description – that is its beauty that it transcends even our imagination. Scripture gives us glimpses of it: a place where women and men give out of their

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poverty rather than their wealth, a place where lion and lamb lie down together and war is taught no more, a place where a new heaven and a new earth are visible before our very eyes.

The Kingdom of God is a work of imagination. It requires looking around at the mess we have made of the world and looking beyond: wiping clean the possibilities and starting from scratch. It is a work of deconstruction, tearing down the limits and reasonable potential and painting with bold new strokes the outlines of a new heaven and a new earth. It is looking at conflicts in our world and imagining how both sides might win. It is taking in the statistics about hunger and obesity and imagining how all might be healthily fed. It is looking around us and looking beyond, allowing God to open up possibilities we only faintly remember from our dreams.

But it is also a matter of looking and seeing. For the Kingdom of God is not only ahead of us, but also surrounding us. We proclaim Christ's death and resurrection until he comes again because it was the first time that inaugurated the kingdom of God in our midst.

The tendency, I think, is to imagine the Kingdom of God as a place – some fairy tale land we'll get to when we die. But I don't think it's that easy. The Kingdom of God is a way of being in the world. We say Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of God the first time he came because he showed us the way. We might not be able to complete it, but that does not mean we cannot engage it, live into it.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Christ is coming again to those who are eagerly awaiting him. Waiting, however, is not a passive practice in this case. Waiting for Kingdom of God, though it may be ahead of us, involves more than simply sitting back and hanging tight. Waiting involves opening our eyes and seeing. Seeing the glimpses, the pieces, the foretaste of what is to come. Waiting involves proclaiming, naming the things we see, giving voice to our dreams and imaginations of what might yet come about. And waiting involves giving, not out of our plenty, and not flat words or false piety, but out of our poverty. We give the two cents we have, trusting tomorrow we will receive more. We lift up the imagining our world so sorely lacks trusting God will surpass even our deepest imaginings. We give out of our poverty trusting that Christ is coming again, holding on to the faith that God is in our midst, hoping that each little thing we do adds to the kingdom God is creating in our very midst.

The Iona Community in Scotland has crafted prayer for our waiting and our watching. Will you pray with me?

Open our eyes, Lord,
Especially if they are half shut
 Because we are tired of looking,
Or half open
 Because we fear to see too much,
Or blurred with tears
 Because yesterday and today and tomorrow
 Are filled with the same pain,
Or contracted

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Because we only look at what we want to see.

Open our eyes, Lord,
To gently scan the life we lead,
 The home we have,
 The world we inhabit,
And so to find,
Among the gremlins and the greyness,
Signs of hope we can fasten on and encourage.

Give us, whose eyes are dimmed by familiarity,
A bigger vision of what you can do
Even with hopeless cases and lost causes
And people of limited ability.

Show us the world as in your sight,
Riddled by debt, deceit and disbelief,
Yet also
Shot through with possibility
For recovery, renewal, redemption.

And lest we fail to distinguish vision from fantasy,
Today, tomorrow, this week,
Open our eyes to one person or one place,
Where we – being even for a moment prophetic –
Might identify and wean a potential in the waiting.

And with all this,
Open our eyes, in yearning, for Jesus.
On the mountains,
In the cities,
Through the corridors of power
And streets of despair,
To help, to heal,
To confront, to convert,
O come, O come, Immanuel.

Amen.