

## **Essentialism: Growing Awareness**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on November 12, 2017  
on Matthew 25:1-13 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

If you have found your way to a shopping mall or drugstore or basically anywhere around town in the past 12 days, you could be fooled into thinking that Christmas had already arrived! And if you were listening closely to today's gospel reading, you might think that the season of Advent was already here! In these final weeks of the church year, the lectionary gives us several texts to start pointing us firmly to Advent — to the waiting, the preparing, the longing in the darkness for Light to be born among us. We're still in Matthew, and we know that Jesus has had numerous encounters with the scribes and the Pharisees, where everything from his leadership to his role has been questioned. Just one chapter earlier, we hear a turn in Jesus's rhetoric — from statements and stories that illustrate the misguidedness of the religious authorities, to parables and prophecies of the coming end of the age. His imagery is fierce and nothing short of apocalyptic — famines and earthquakes, wars and suffering, weeping and gnashing of teeth, heavenly hysteria into which the Son of Man will return. So "keep awake," Matthew reminds us a half a dozen times before today's parable even begins. "Be ready, for you don't know when the Lord will come."

The community that Matthew had in mind when writing his gospel was one decades-removed from the life of Christ, nearly forty years after

Jesus died. Their fathers and mothers were the ones who had heard Jesus proclaim that he will soon be back for them, so who needed a long-range plan when the end was surely coming? But years later, the Jewish community of Jesus-followers had suffered significantly. Fear had invaded them, and frankly, they were tired of waiting. "Is this whole "coming again" thing for real? And are all these bad things part of the master plan?," they had to wonder. Subtext: "What is taking so long?!"<sup>1</sup>

It is to them that Matthew records this little parable from Jesus. "The kingdom of heaven will be like this," Jesus says. Ten bridesmaids await a bridegroom, ready with their lamps to see the anticipated one. When his coming was delayed, all slept until a shout pierced the air: "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come and meet him!" In their excitement, five of those bridesmaids realized they didn't have enough oil to keep their lamps lit and asked the other five to share. "Not a chance," those five said, "there won't be enough for us! Y'all go find some yourselves." And, of course, as the five ran off to find a 1st century stand-in for a 24-hour WalMart who sells lamp oil, the bridegroom returns, takes the well-oiled five to the banquet, and leaves out the others. "Keep awake therefore," Jesus concludes, "for you know neither the day nor the hour."

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor has a most helpful storying of this season in the lives of the early Matthean community in her sermon "God's Beloved Thief," on Matthew 24:37-44 in *Home By Another Way*, p4.

These parables about the end of times pick up steam in transitional moments in time. When a big date approaches from generation to generation, when natural disasters come right on the heels of each other, when violence begets violence like it has these past months and days, and it all just seems to be too much, these texts that point us to the consummation of all things seem more relevant than ever. But unlike that early community of Christians, some two millennia has passed since our Lord. The urgency seems to have dissipated; our schedules are filled. So what are we as Christians to do to prepare for the Christ who has died and risen and will come again? What posture might we assume as we wait?

Several weeks ago, our sweet baby Silas turned one and went off for his one year-old check-up with our pediatrician. He is nothing short of a miracle of soft skin and snuggles, a little belly and a lot of belly laughs; his doctor even told me so as she proclaimed him healthy and whole! But after they did his annual shots and drew blood for various routine tests, our doctor returned a few minutes later to tell me that his white blood cell count was a little high. "I'm not worried," she said, "it could just be a virus or something small, but let's have him come back in a few days and recheck it." She read the slight shade of panic on my face, but reassured me that it was likely nothing. Trusting that she knows far more about blood cell counts than I do, I tried not worry.

A few days later, we came back for the same drill — undressed baby, weight check, pricked finger, and 4-5 minutes later, another test result.

This time, the count had gone up just a bit. My shade of panic was stronger this time, but again, she calmed me. "It only ticked up a little," she said reassuringly. "Perhaps we just didn't give him enough time to get over whatever virus he might have had. So let's wait about a week and a half this time before we test again."

A week and a half later, in we go — undressed baby, weight check, pricked finger, anxious mama. The normal five minutes pass, then six, eight, ten. I'm wondering what's taking so long. While we're waiting, I'm fighting the urge grab my phone and Google out of my fear or scroll endlessly through Facebook for a numbing distraction. Fifteen minutes, then 18, 20, 22. Emotions have started fuzzing my brain, and I'm only staying off my phone by singing hymns to Silas and — let's face it — for me too. "Strength for today, bright hope for tomorrow," ... "grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days." 23, 24, 25. I've run out of hymns — or at least, my brain is not allowing me to recall anymore in minute 25. I'm now convinced that Silas has leukemia, and every sound I hear outside our room is, I'm sure, the pediatric cancer team assembling to have The Conversation with me, the mom of the sick kid. 26, 27, 28, 29. Fear has taken over. I'm gazing at my son, I feel his sleeping body in my arms, but I'm not fully there — my mind and my spirit have raced ahead into our future. I'm seeing the sure mountain of medical debt, wondering how chemo will ravage his little body, or what we'll tell the other two, or

how long we'll have with him. The wrenching sadness and choking fear of the future I had mapped out was more than I could handle.

On minute 30, something snapped in me. I couldn't wait a second longer and opened the door — only to see our wonderful doctor, jogging towards the door (to tell me about that diagnosis, I knew it), who greets me with a huge apology and a big smile. "I'm so sorry that our delay kept you waiting! We got backed up in the lab, but you're free to go now! Silas's numbers are normal now; he is absolutely fine." Instantly, I burst into tears of anger and gratitude, overwhelming fear and profound relief.

Even if your mind and imagination don't send you into a tailspin like mine did, what happens to us while waiting amidst delay might sound familiar to some of you. Perhaps you are waiting and longing for something deeply satisfying: a book you're wanting to read to arrive from Amazon, the birth of a child in your family, a new season of retirement and all the delight that promises to come with it. Or maybe you're waiting for something you dread: test results that may not be good, the call from a debt collector, decisions about layoffs during a company merger, the verdict in a case. In either case, the experience of waiting takes on a different feel depending on what it is you're waiting for.

But for many of us, the kind of waiting we likely do most often is less clear but often more potent. "If I were only married, then I wouldn't struggle with low self-esteem... Once my kids are all out of daycare, then we'll not be stressed about money all the time.... When I finally recover

from surgery, then I'll be able to get back to normal... Just after I can make it to the end of the semester / get that promotion / make it to retirement / have that terribly hard conversation / clean out the basement, then I can breathe again and be set!" It's the in-between waiting, the "if only this, then that" kind of waiting, much of which simply demands a passage of time and a change in factors that sometimes is just out of our control. And I have to ask us all: **what are we doing in the midst of the wait?** What is our posture? How are we seriously preparing physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally in this season for what might happen on the other side in the next?

Singer-songwriter John Mayer wrote a catchy hit back in 2009 called "Waiting on the World to Change." In it, he bemoans the state of things — everything from politics to the media. And then he sings: "It's not that we don't care, we just know that the fight ain't fair, so we keep on waiting, waiting on the world to change... and we're still waiting, waiting on the world to change."<sup>2</sup> While there's a part of me that so understands this mindset, a stronger, more urgent part wonders, "well what are **you** doing to change it? Quit waiting, start doing!" Grab a hammer and a nail, let down your fear, pick up a little extra lamp oil at the store, and let's do something about it!

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<sup>2</sup> John Mayer, "Waiting on the World to Change," <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johnmayer/waitingontheworldtochange.html>

It's like the time several years ago when one of my intelligent and idealistic young adults at Highland Baptist Church, the congregation I served in Louisville, gave in to a similar passivity. One night, we were sharing in a meal together with a group of folks from church and conversation turned to church matters: an upcoming renovation, staff changes, budget questions, a new Bible study. Then Eric asked a question I will never forget: "when is Highland going to 'do it'?" I must have had a blank stare on my face, or perhaps I shot him a Look with a capital L. But before I could ask him to clarify, he jumped in: "you know, when is Highland going to *really do it?* — do the big, radical Jesus-following, not all this other stuff." Again — I get it, I get what he was longing for, a huge, life-transforming way of life led by his church that took him down a real, authentic, sacrificial path of discipleship. But maybe it was the company woman in me, or maybe I had gotten tired of that John Mayer song, but regardless — I found myself wondering, "what do you think we're trying to do here? And also: "Highland" is made up of people like you! What are you waiting for?"

I think this is a bit of what Jesus is inviting us to consider in today's parable. "Keep awake," he says, "for you know neither the day nor the hour." In the seasons of waiting, let's consider our posture. Don't let fear or anxiety get the best of you. Stay away from things that will only numb or distract you from your preparation. Have courage, and find active ways to engage in the change you so desire. Grow in your awareness of the

state of things, so that when the delay is up, when your moment comes, you are not caught unaware.

Brothers and sisters, we the church are in a rich and ripe season of waiting. Together, we have made bold and courageous decisions regarding the landscape of our shared future. We know broadly where we're headed, and these November weeks of visioning together are clarifying for us the compass we can use to get us there. If we hold up our lamps and strain our eyes just so, we can see the hopeful future that lies ahead! And slowly — bit by bit, drawing by drawing, conversation by conversation, prayer by prayer, brick by brick — we are getting there. But while we wait, the lure of paralyzing fear and deep anxiety about what our future will look like is real. And it can feel so tempting just to say, "well once we've done our renovation / raised the money / figured out our programming, **then** we can really *do it!*" But lest we fall into either trap, might we remember what is an essential posture in the waiting: that God gives us to each other to encourage us — for preparation, for awareness, for courage, and for Light even in the darkness.

As someone who is lured by productivity and, when left unchecked, the rhythms of my life are ones of 'doing doing doing,' I love that all the bridesmaids — foolish and wise — sleep in the parable. It reminds me that Jesus isn't asking for constant vigilance while we wait, for doing more and more and more to earn our way into the banquet hall with nary a thought of rest. We're not to lock our metaphorical knees like a bridesmaid who

does so in a wedding ceremony and then passes out! Rather, today's parable serves as an encouragement to me that waiting in good company — and partly by closing our eyes fully in the dark so that we can see God in the Light — is a vital part of our preparation.<sup>3</sup>

For in the end, the bridegroom will come for us! We don't have to fumble our way to the great feast alone, for Christ is coming to lead us there. It may feel like Friday, but Sunday's coming! Amen!

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<sup>3</sup> David Lose wrote helpfully about the sleeping maidens in this week's blog post, which can be found here: <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/pentecost-23-a-the-waiting/>