

**Sermon for Sunday, November 12, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

It's getting near the end of the year. The days are shortening,  
the temperature is cooling,  
and Christmas decorations are already in the stores.

But here in the church, our year ends a earlier than the year of the calendar, a whole month earlier, because we begin earlier, with the preparations for celebrating Jesus' birth in the season of Advent. And if you listen to the gospel readings each week, you'll know that we follow Jesus' life through the Sundays of the year. The flow is disrupted a little by Lent and Easter – we kind of skip forward then, and then after Easter pick up again where we left off at the end of Epiphany, in the middle of Jesus' traveling and teaching and preaching. And so by November, we've got to the period just before Jesus was crucified. His teaching has a new intensity now; he's trying to get his disciples ready for whatever might face them, to give them everything they will need to know when he is no longer there. Which means it turns to ultimate things, of life and death and life beyond death.

And that's why, these last 3 weeks of November, we will be hearing Jesus telling stories, parables, about judgement and waiting and the coming of God again. They're not the sort of thing we normally talk a whole lot about.

We have stereotypes that tell us that the only people that talk of the second coming, of judgment, of the rapture, are Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, people from Arkansas and Alabama and Texas. They belong to old fashioned preachers of hell fire and brimstone, and while they might have preached like that here when this parish was founded, that's history.

We have gone beyond that sort of old time religion. We're modern, or maybe even postmodern, in our thinking; we're north-easterners; we're Episcopalians, for God's sake!

It is easy to reduce our faith to manageable proportions, to focus on the things we can easily see

and understand. It is easy to stick with a God of the past, who did great things, leading a people out of Egypt into the promised land, setting them up with judges and kings and prophets, teaching them how to live with justice and love. A God, who as time passed, did not abandon the people, even when they abandoned their faith, a God who persisted and persevered,  
 and who eventually came among them,  
 God incarnate, enfleshed, God with skin on,  
 to show us how to love and how to live, and who died  
 and rose again, so that we could live.  
 That's the God of the past.

And then there's the God of the present,  
 the one we cry out to when we are struggling,  
 and whisper to  
 beside our beds,  
 the one who hears our prayers and answers them,  
 though not always  
 as we would wish.  
 That's the God of the present, who we worship here today.

But past and present  
 are not all there is to God. Our God is also  
 God of the future; our faith  
 has a future dimension to it.  
 We sometimes talk about this  
 in terms of resurrection, what will or will not  
 happen to us  
 when we die.  
 That's important, but it's only a piece  
 of the future work  
 of God. The bigger piece  
 in terms of what the Bible has to say about it  
 is the future on the cosmic scale,  
 the far bigger – and more scary – themes of judgement and waiting and the coming of  
 God again.

They are difficult to get a hold of; our faith  
 is a whole lot easier  
 if we pretend they aren't there.  
 But to ignore these themes

is to ignore a huge part of our faith  
 and a huge part  
 of what God promises to us.  
 Sunday by Sunday  
 we proclaim them. In the Great Thanksgiving,  
 when we say,  
 “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”  
 In the Eucharist, when we eat the bread and drink the wine  
 which proclaim not just the death of Christ  
 but point forward  
 to his coming again.

And so it matters  
 that we talk about this stuff,  
 it matters  
 that we don't just relegate it to some sort of storybook stereotype  
 of a wild-haired, flashing eyed Victorian preachers  
 thundering damnation from the pulpit.  
 It matters  
 because it is our future  
 we are talking about, our future  
 in the hands of the God we love.

And so, in the coming weeks, as we draw to the end of this church year, and as we begin  
 a new year, we will hear some of the stories Jesus told  
 about this future dimension of God and God's world.

And there is a tension. There is a tension in all these writings, in all the people of God,  
 between a desire for God to come quickly, to intervene one final time and bring all that is  
 evil and painful and full of suffering to an end, to being into being a new creation in  
 which none of that is present, where God's love is tangible and life-giving and all  
 pervasive  
 as water and air,  
 a tension between that  
 and the fear that God's coming again will bring judgement  
 and that we will be judged and found wanting.  
 It is a tension which comes out of our own awareness that we are not perfect,  
 and that any judgement must implicate us  
 before it frees us.

For two thousand years  
we have been talking  
about the return of Christ,  
for two thousand years,  
we have been waiting for his return as judge. And for two thousand years  
nothing has happened,  
or at least, nothing that we have been expecting. Is it any wonder  
that we have begun to wonder  
if it will ever  
happen,  
if God will ever return  
if the promises of a new heaven  
and a new earth  
are just empty promises.

And today's story, today's parable from Jesus  
is about that, about  
the waiting.

Ten young girls standing in the darkness  
with only the glimmer of their oil lamps  
to shine in the darkness  
as they wait for a bridegroom  
to arrive.  
Five of them  
brought extra oil, five thought  
they would have enough.  
But it took longer  
than they expected, so long, in fact, that they all fell asleep.  
And as they lay there, their lamps  
burned down, and down, and began to flicker out.  
But at midnight, there was a shout: "The bridegroom is coming!"  
And they jumped up, and those with extra oil  
refilled their lamps,  
but those without any  
had to run off to buy some more.  
And while they were gone,  
the bridegroom arrived,  
and welcomed the girls who were there  
into the feast.

But the other girls?  
the ones who'd waited just as long  
but had gone off  
to grab some more oil?  
they were out of luck.

By the time they got back  
the doors were closed.  
They couldn't get it.  
they'd missed out  
on the wedding  
celebrations.  
All for want  
of some spare  
oil.

You see,  
we are waiting,  
waiting for the coming of Christ again,  
and Christ is coming,  
but no-one  
knows when.  
It could be  
during coffee hour.  
It could be  
next month.  
Or it might not be  
until long after  
we are gone from this earth.  
But the crucial question is,  
whenever it is  
that Jesus comes,  
will we be ready?

Jesus doesn't tell us in this parable  
exactly how it is  
we are to be ready – we have to rely on his other teaching,  
and the teaching of the rest of scripture.  
And they tell us

that being ready  
 is about living lives now  
 where we would not be ashamed  
 if Jesus walked in the door  
 and looked at our calendars,  
 if Jesus walked in the door  
 and looked at our checkbooks,  
 if Jesus walked in the door  
 and sat down for coffee at the kitchen table.  
 It's about living lives now  
 where the choices we make  
 about how we spend our time and our money  
 reflect God's priorities  
 of justice and truth and mercy and love.

And even more than that,  
 it's how we choose to spend time with God, here and now.  
 Yesterday in his address at our diocesan convention, Bishop Provenzano told us this  
 story:

When I was a boy I served as an acolyte Monday through Friday during the 7:15  
 mass. Each day there was a man who came to mass, and following the dismissal  
 would sit in the pew motionless for hours. Early on, presuming that he might be a  
 homeless man or someone with medical or emotional issues, the young curate  
 decided to go over to the man and inquired what he was doing everyday, just sitting  
 there.

“Oh”, said the man, gesturing to the crucifix over the altar, “I’m just sitting here  
 looking at Him and He is just looking at me”. I overhear the conversation which  
 has for all these many years shaped and informed my prayer life.

In the midst of the chaos and confusion of tweets, fake news, outrageous claims,  
 and selfish posturing. In the face of mass shootings, opioid and heroin overdoses,  
 the continued uncertainty of threatening war, deportations, racial conflicts and the  
 political circus that has become the staple of our everyday experience, we must  
 remember who we are, and what we are.

I am asking each of you and the entire diocese, each and every person, to join me in  
 prayer. Not the kind of prayer in which we add “...our thoughts and prayers are  
 with you...”

but rather, serious prayer, deliberate and sustained prayer. The kind of prayer where you sit and look at him and he looks at you.

What I propose is this: a covenant to begin on the Feast of Epiphany, January 6, between the people of the diocese and the bishop for one hour of prayer each day, one day of prayer each month, and eight days of prayer each year.

No cell phones, no computers, no TV or no Newspapers. Just each of us and Jesus as a way to help change the tone and tenor of the world that God has given into our care. I ask that parish clergy help to provide guidance and tools to the people of your parish. Praying is something we know about. Clergy, let's equip the saints for the building up of the church and our ministry to the world.

I believe, that by God's grace, our prayer will strengthen each of us, and provide a faithful witness in the face of hollow distractions.

The coming of God. Waiting. Judgement. Promise.

It sounds dangerous, it sounds uncertain.

But, in fact, nothing could be more certain, nothing could be safer. Because as followers of Christ, we live in his footsteps; we are made one with him, and by God's grace we have nothing to fear.