

**Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost A
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

LIVING THE BAPTIZED LIFE

IT'S ALWAYS TOUGH TO PREACH THIS TIME OF THE CALENDAR YEAR BECAUSE NOT ONLY IS THERE TENSION BETWEEN THE SECULAR WORLD OUT THERE WHERE THE CHRISTMAS SEASON IS ALREADY IN FULL SWING AND IN HERE WHERE WE ARE NOT HEARING SCRIPTURE TEXTS ABOUT THE BIRTH OF THE BABY JESUS BUT ABOUT HIS COMING AGAIN AT END OF THE AGES. THERE'S THAT TENSION - BUT THERE'S ALSO THE TENSION THAT EXISTS BETWEEN LUTHER'S STRONG THEOLOGY OF GRACE AND GRACE ALONE - "WE ARE NOW JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE AS A GIFT THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS" - AND THESE END-OF-THE- YEAR /ADVENT

**SCRIPTURAL WARNINGS OF OUR NEED TO BE
PREPARED FOR CHRIST'S COMING AGAIN. IT SEEMS
LIKE THE MESSAGE IS "WE'VE GOT TO DO
SOMETHING TO BE READY OR WE WILL BE LEFT OUT.
" AND THAT MESSAGE SURELY SEEMS TO BE LOUD
AND CLEAR IN TODAY'S GOSPEL. SO, LETS TAKE A
LOOK.**

**JUST PRIOR TO TODAY'S GOSPEL TEXT JESUS
HAS BEEN RESPONDING TO HIS DISCIPLES'
QUESTIONS ABOUT SIGNS OF HIS COMING AGAIN AND
OF THE END OF THE AGE. USING EXAMPLES SUCH AS
THE CURSED FIG TREE AND UNFAITHFUL SLAVES,
JESUS WARNS THEM THAT SUCH THINGS AS WARS,
RUMORS OF WAR, FAMINE, EARTHQUAKES,
PERSECUTIONS AND THE LIKE WILL BE NOTHING**

MORE THAN THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS FOR THE END OF THE AGES. THEN HE TELLS THIS STORY.

TEN BRIDESMAIDS, AS WAS THE CUSTOM IN THOSE DAYS, ARE WAITING TO USHER THE BRIDEGROOM INTO THE WEDDING BANQUET. FIVE OF THEM TAKE WITH THEM EXTRA OIL FOR THEIR LAMPS - JUST IN CASE THE BRIDEGROOM IS LATE. FIVE DO NOT. AND, OF COURSE, THE BRIDEGROOM IS DELAYED AND FIVE OF THOSE BRIDESMAIDS RUN OUT OF OIL. THE OTHER FIVE WON'T SHARE THEIR EXTRA OIL. INSTEAD THEY SEND THE FIVE OUT SHOPPING, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, IT SEEMS, FOR THEIR OWN OIL. BUT WHILE THEY ARE GONE, THE BRIDEGROOM COMES AND THE DOOR TO THE

WEDDING BANQUET IS SHUT. WHEN THE FIVE GET BACK, THE BRIDEGROOM REFUSES TO LET THEM IN, SAYING, "I DON'T KNOW YOU." THEN JESUS CLOSES THIS PARABLE WITH THESE WORDS: "KEEP AWAKE, THEREFORE, FOR YOU KNOW NEITHER THE DAY NOR THE HOUR."

NOW, IF THIS PARABLE OF JESUS IS INTERPRETED AS AN ALLEGORY, AS IT OFTEN HAS BEEN DOWN THROUGH THE AGES, HERE'S WHAT WE GET: CHRIST IS THE BRIDEGROOM. WE ARE THE BRIDESMAIDS. THE OIL IS OUR GOOD WORKS. THE CLOSED DOOR IS THE LAST JUDGMENT. THEREFORE, IF WE HAVE NOT STORED UP ENOUGH GOOD WORKS, NOT ONLY WILL WE NOT GET INTO HEAVEN. WE ALSO WILL HEAR JESUS SAY TO US, "I DON'T KNOW

YOU.” HUH? “WE ARE NOW JUSTIFIED BY GRACE AS A GIFT THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS OURS IN CHRIST JESUS.” “I DON’T KNOW YOU.” SEE WHAT I’M SAYING ABOUT THE TENSION!

A NUMBER OF CURRENT THEOLOGIANS, HOWEVER, CHALLENGE THIS ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION THAT HAS BEEN POPULAR DOWN THROUGH THE AGES – AND THEY USE VARIED THEOLOGICAL TOOLS TO DISCOUNT WHAT SEEMS TO BE, AT LEAST ON THE SURFACE, EXACTLY WHAT THE PARABLE SAYS. BUT THEIR THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES ARE TOO COMPLICATED AND THEIR INTERPRETATIONS TOO VARIED TO CONVEY HERE – PERHAPS IN A BIBLE STUDY BUT NOT IN A SERMON. SO, WHAT DO I PREACH THIS DAY ABOUT OUR

**WAITING FOR JESUS' SECOND COMING AND THE END
OF THE AGE?**

**WELL, MY FAVORITE CONTEMPORARY
THEOLOGIAN, DAVID LOSE, SAYS THAT FOR HIM,
THIS IS THE MOST CHALLENGING OF ALL THE
PARABLES THAT JESUS TOLD. HE AGREES THAT THE
ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION DOESN'T FIT OUR
UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S GIFT OF GRACE – BUT HE
ALSO ACKNOWLEDGES OUR NEED TO WRESTLE WITH
THIS ONE A BIT – TO DISCOVER PERHAPS AT LEAST
SOMETHING OF WHAT JESUS IS TEACHING HIS
DISCIPLES HERE. SO, HE OFFERS US PREACHERS
THREE OR FOUR IDEAS ABOUT WHAT TO DO WITH
THIS PARABLE. FIRST OF ALL, HE SAYS, JUST ADMIT
THAT THIS PARABLE IS ODD, OMINOUS AND**

ARCHAIC. WE DON'T RELATE MUCH TO WISE AND FOOLISH BRIDESMAIDS OR WEDDINGS HELD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT OR LAMPS THAT BURN OUT OF OIL. WE JUST DON'T. AND SECONDLY, HE SAYS, AGREE THAT THE KIND OF WAITING THIS PARABLE ENCOURAGES IS HARD. WE ALL KNOW THAT. WAITING FOR SOMETHING WAY OVERDUE TRIES THE SOUL, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE'RE WAITING FOR SOMETHING WE'RE NOT SURE WILL EVER COME. WE SEE THAT FRUSTRATION ILLUSTRATED IN OUR SECOND READING FOR THIS DAY. THOSE EARLY CHRISTIANS BELIEVED THAT JESUS' SECOND COMING WAS GOING TO HAPPEN IN THEIR LIFETIME AND SO THEY WERE WORRIED ABOUT THOSE WHO HAD DIED AND WERE DYING – BEFORE JESUS RETURNED! BUT

THAT WAS CLOSE TO 2,000 YEARS AGO. IM NOT SURE THAT TOO MANY OF US TODAY GIVE MUCH THOUGHT AT ALL TO JESUS' SECOND COMING. ALTHOUGH I WILL TELL YOU THAT ONCE, WHILE WALKING DOWN THE STRIP IN LAS VEGAS, I DID SAY TO MY FRIEND. "I SURE HOPE JESUS DOESN'T COME BACK TODAY. NOT SURE I WANT TO BE FOUND HERE."

BUT BACK TO THE PARABLE. DR. LOSE SUGGESTS THIS IS A PARABLE ABOUT WAITING – AND WAITING IS SOMETHING WE ALL ARE FAMILIAR WITH. WE'RE ALL WAITING FOR SOMETHING – A PHONE CALL FROM A LOVED ONE TELLING US THEY MADE IT HOME SAFELY, AND WORRYING UNTIL WE HEAR THEIR VOICE... WAITING FOR A REPORT FROM A DOCTOR TELLING US THE RESULTS OF MEDICAL

**TESTS AND PRAYING THAT THE RESULT WILL BE
GOOD NEWS BUT ANXIOUS THAT IT WILL NOT
...WAITING FOR SCHOOL TO BE OUT FOR CHRISTMAS
OR SPRING BREAK OR SUMMER AND THINKING IT
WILL NEVER COME ...WAITING TO
GRADUATE....WAITING FOR A PHONE CALL ABOUT A
NEW JOB....WAITING FOR THE DAY WE CAN RETIRE
...WAITING FOR THE BIRTH OF A NEW
BABY...WAITING FOR WORD ABOUT THE DEATH OF A
DEAR FRIEND THAT YOU KNOW IS COMING SOON,
..WAITING FOR A WORD OF FORGIVENESS FROM
SOMEONE YOU'VE OFFENDED,...WAITING TO LEARN
WHERE YOU WILL SERVE YOUR INTERNSHIP,
WAITING FOR THE CALL PROCESS TO
BEGIN....WAITING...**

AND YES, WHILE IT MAY NOT BE SO MUCH ON OUR MINDS AND HEARTS, WE CHRISTIANS ARE WAITING FOR THAT SECOND COMING OF JESUS AND FOR THE END OF THE AGES. BUT HERE'S THE THING. EVEN JESUS HIMSELF SAID HE DID NOT KNOW THE DAY NOR THE HOUR WHEN THAT WOULD BE. THAT'S IN GOD'S HANDS AND NOT OURS. SO, WE CAN FRET ABOUT THAT, GET ALL ANXIOUS THAT WE'RE NOT STACKING UP ENOUGH GOOD WORKS - OR - WE CAN CONSIDER WHAT IT REALLY IS THAT WE - DISCIPLES, FOLLOWERS OF JESUS - ARE TO BE ABOUT WHILE WE ARE WAITING. WHAT IS IT THAT WE NEED TO BE DOING TO "BE READY?"

AND THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE. WE ARE TO LIVE THE LIFE THAT DISCIPLES ARE CALLED TO LIVE -

**AND SCRIPTURE MAKES THAT RATHER CLEAR. IN
MICAH, WE READ: “WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE
OF YOU BUT TO DO JUSTICE, LOVE KINDNESS, AND TO
WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD?” WHEN ASKED
ABOUT THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT, JESUS
REPLIED, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD
WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL,
AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. THIS IS THE GREATEST
AND FIRST COMMANDMENT. AND A SECOND IS LIKE
IT: YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”**

**THERE IT IS! WHAT DO WE DO IN THE
MEANTIME? WHAT DO WE DO WHILE WE WAIT? WE
LIVE – LOVING GOD AND LOVING NEIGHBOR –
LEAVING THE TIMING OF THE SEOND COMING IN THE
HANDS OF OUR LOVING GOD WHOSE GRACE IS**

**SUFFICIENT AND WHO EXPECTS US AT THE WEDDING
BANQUET – CLOTHED, NOT IN OUR GOOD WORKS –
FOR WHO COULD STAND? – BUT RATHER CLOTHED
IN THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF HIS SON, THE CHRIST.
THAT WE BELIEVE. THAT WE TRUST.**

**YOU KNOW, LUTHER SAID, “EVEN IF I KNEW
THAT TOMORROW THE WORLD WOULD GO TO
PIECES, I WOULD STILL PLANT MY APPLE TREE.”
WHILE WE WAIT, WE SIMPLY NEED TO DO THE SAME.
AMEN.**