

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Advent 1
December 1, 2019

Wait and Hope Matthew 24:36-44

It is the First Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday of the new Church Year. We begin our year together looking forward to the coming of the Christ-Child. There is word in Spanish – esperar. Esperar is a verb that means “to wait.” It also means “to hope.” In Spanish, then, it is impossible to wait without hoping and impossible to hope without waiting. That makes this verb, esperar, a perfect word for Advent. We wait for the coming of our Lord. We wait with hope for the coming of our Lord. We wait, we hope.

Dana Williams spent her childhood as a member of a fundamental independent Christian Church. The church believed that all people were somehow responsible for finding God. They believed that faith is not an act of God, but that faith depends on our actions. She was taught that there were things she had to do, rules and laws she had to keep in order to be loved by God, in order to be redeemed by Christ. The Bible was interpreted literally, word for word.

Dana said sometimes, I think, the Bible word was stretched a bit, probably in an attempt to keep teenagers out of trouble. Sometimes it probably worked. Other times it most certainly did not! There were rules in that congregation, many, many rules.

Card playing, for example, was a serious sin – after all the pictures on the face cards were viewed as evil, containing Satanic symbols that were carefully pointed out during our Sunday School classes. Going to movies was most certainly dangerous. Scripture reads: “Men love darkness more than light for their deeds are evil.” Movie theatres, are, of course, dark.

Girls wearing pants was not God’s will. There is that Hebrew Bible passage: “Women shall not wear the clothes of a man.” Drinking alcoholic beverages, even for Communion was forbidden. The minister explained that, based on his research, the wine used at the Last Supper was certainly not fermented. Dancing? Surely carnal lust would overcome our self-control if we danced with our friends. Now, dancing on roller skates was okay!? I always wanted to ask Rev. Brown what difference roller skates made, but I never quite had the courage, says Dana.

Along with these rules, and many others, came a strong emphasis on the second coming of Jesus. It was taught and believed, just as the writer of Matthew believed, that the coming of Christ was imminent. One needed to be sure that one did not get caught playing cards or dancing or having a glass of wine when Jesus appeared to call you home. In addition, these words of Matthew got all tangled up with the Book of Revelation, John’s beautiful metaphor of God’s love for all people. Matthew’s warnings and Revelation’s description of John’s metaphor got all smashed together in a most threatening, and most unscholarly way.

We were frequently reminded of Matthew's warning, she says: Two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Then the dire warning in John's Revelation would get tacked into the story, producing fear and trembling in even the most devout Christians.

For some years as a youngster Dana lived with a rather constant fear of being the one left at the mill. On Saturdays, my friends, Mary, Cheri, and Patty and I would ride our bikes downtown. First, we would stop at the library so that patty and I, the bookworms, could drop off our load of books and pick up a new stack for the week to come. Then we would continue our journey to downtown. Now downtown in Rock Island, Illinois offered limited entertainment. We were not allowed to go to the movies. That did not leave much, but we did have some favorite things to do. We would go to the dime stores, the Woolworths and the Newberry's. We found ways to spend our allowances and babysitting money. Mary liked to look at what we regarded as "boy toys," things like baseballs and airplane models. Cheri always headed for the make-up, and perfume counter. Patty bought teen magazines, although, of course, the boy toys, the make-up, and the magazines were regarded as somewhat sinful. I Looked at embroidery thread. Yes, I was a little boring, even then, says Dana. We all bought candy.

As we wandered away from each other in pursuit of our different interests, we would become separated in the store. The shelves were high and the aisles long. At least once on each trip, I would look up from my shopping and notice that neither Mary nor Cheri, nor Patty were anywhere to be seen.

I would panic! I would look around terrified. I just knew what had happened. Jesus had come, Mary, Cheri, and Patty had been taken up to meet Jesus in the clouds, and I a sinful creature, had been left on earth to face seven years of tribulation. My heart would race, the fear was real.

Clutching her embroidery threads in her sweaty hand, she would rush frantically from aisle to aisle, finally rounding the corner to find Cheri calmly checking out the nail polish. Her fear came from a feeling that she would not measure up, that she was too naughty, that she had played cards or even worn jeans or kissed a boy or told a lie too many times and that there was no way Jesus would choose her to be taken up with him. It seemed obvious that the Rev. Brown was right, it must be time for Jesus to come, and there she was unready, not good enough, not loveable enough to meet her Lord and Savior. And so, she was afraid, she was waiting without hope.

Well, Jesus didn't come during her childhood. She grew up, went to college, and decided there had to be more to religion, more to faith, than rules and laws and fear, terrible fear.

Her searching led her to a God of love, a God who loved her no matter what, even if she went to the movies, played cards with her friends, or even if she truly did act in a sinful way. It is that kind of a God, that kind of love, that we share in this community of faith. We know a graceful God who loves us no matter what.

Matthew calls us today to be ready. We need to be ready all the time, for being ready means we share God's love with all people. We need to be ready, knowing that even if we are not ready, we will never be separated from God. Being ready does not mean being afraid. Being ready means esperanza, waiting and hoping, hoping and waiting.

So, in this season of Advent we wait and hope for God to come to us as the Christ-Child. We wait and hope, hope and wait for the love that comes to us as Christmas. While we wait, we are called to share our hope with others.

That's what being ready means. There are people all around us who wait without hope. We are called to bring hope, the hope of a new birth, to all those who are afraid, who long to know God's love.

Now, at this point in the worship services of that church from Dana's childhood, there would be an altar call, and invitation. The choir would sing, "Just as I am without one plea...O lamb of God, I come, I come."

The minister would plead for folks to come to the altar and give their lives to Jesus, to testify to their belief. You will be relieved to know that I won't be doing that here today.

You do not need to do anything to give your life to Jesus. God claimed you in the waters of Holy Baptism, gave you the promise of eternal life because of the willingness of Jesus to die for you and me, because of the resurrection to new life. There is nothing you can do to take that away. God loves you and will take you up on the last day. Just believe God's promise!!

Instead, today, I invite you to this table of grace. Come to the Table and receive the living bread, the body and blood of our Lord Christ. Receive the promise of eternal life. As you receive this holy sacrament receive the hope that makes the waiting bearable.

Amen!