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What is expected of us as we watch and work for the realization of God's reign among us? What should we be doing in this seemingly endless interim between the appearances of Jesus? These questions have been pertinent to the lives of every believer since the beginning of Christianity, and the answers have remained the same: Be faithful, be vigilant and be prepared.

In order to be faithful, vigilant and prepared, we must return again and again to Jesus, in whom God is revealed. We must return again and again to his announcement of the kingdom and the story of our salvation. Only in this deliberate return will we find truth, reason for being, and the motivation to continue believing, hoping and reaching out in love and compassion to all.

Some have defined this act of returning as a quest. Some have compared it to being refreshed and renewed at the wellspring of life. Call it what you will, but without this action, we lose our way and can be swayed more easily by inauthentic images of Jesus. As N.T. Wright has noted, every month or two some publisher comes up with a blockbuster, saying that Jesus was a New Age guru, an Egyptian freemason or a hippie revolutionary (*The Challenge of Jesus*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill.: 1999). Every year or two, some scholar or seminar of scholars suggest that Jesus was a peasant Cynic, a wandering wordsmith or a preacher of liberal values born out

of due time.

Despite these roadblocks, dead ends and detours on the road to finding Jesus, Wright insists that the quest for Jesus (or the act of returning to him again and again) is a necessary and nonnegotiable aspect of Christian discipleship. This conviction is reflected in the letter to the Hebrews. The intended readers of Hebrews were already growing weary of waiting and watching for Jesus. As early as the 80s, many were considering a return to their Jewish roots. Still others were drawn to Judaism as a way to save themselves from imperial persecution. For those reasons, the ancient author made an extended and eloquent argument for the unique superiority of Jesus, his person, his priesthood and his sacrifice. In today's second reading, the author cites the example of Abraham, whose faith in God moved him to launch out into unknown and unmapped territory while believing that he and his barren wife Sarah might have a child. He was willing to believe that eventually his descendants would outnumber the stars and the sands on the seashore. Then, when put to the ultimate test by God, Abraham was willing to offer his only son in sacrifice. Søren Kierkegaard has suggested that Abraham was able to become a sojourner at God's prompting because "he left one thing behind and took one thing with him. He left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him. Otherwise he would never have gone forth" (*Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, Plough Publishing House, Farmington, Pa.: 1999).

In today's Gospel, the Lucan Jesus will continue the formation of his disciples so that they can cultivate a faith like Abraham's and live in preparedness for Jesus' return. Jesus urged them (and us) to trust in God rather than live in fear of what may or may not happen. Jesus invited his own to be detached rather than find fulfillment and security in earthly possessions — and, in their detachment, to provide for the poor. With two parables concerning the relationship between a master and his servants, Jesus underscored the readiness that should characterize believers. Like good stewards, we are to care for those in our charge and not neglect their needs.

The disciples of Jesus are not to regard the poor as an economic burden to be solved by one governmental program or another. We are to treasure the poor as an opportunity for finding, knowing and loving him. Surely some of their disguises are frightful, as Mother Teresa was fond of saying, but they embody Christ, and in serving them we serve the One for whom we wait and watch; in whom we hope and trust.

We know neither the day nor the hour when Jesus shall return, so each of us must live as if that day is today. We are also to remember that — in all we are and in all we do — we are not alone. Our God dwells with and within us. We are also surrounded and supported by the faithful here on earth as well as those who have gone ahead of us. On the strength of that communion, we become who we are: church.

WISDOM 18:6-9

Traditionally attributed to Solomon, Wisdom is the last written book of the Hebrew scriptures. Scholars assign Wisdom a first-century B.C.E. date and agree that it was written by an unnamed author in Alexandria, Egypt, for the Jewish community there — the largest Jewish community in the diaspora — urging them to remain faithful to God and the good news of salvation. In Alexandria, a bustling seaport founded in 332 B.C.E. by Alexander the Great, there was much to attract believers from their faith. Ships from all over the world brought not only strange and exotic goods but also a variety of diverse peoples, each with their own politics, philosophies and ideologies. Alexandria was a major intellectual center in the ancient world: home of a great museum, a famed university and an unparalleled library with more than 400,000 volumes.

Today's first reading is from the second part of the Book of Wisdom (11:2–19:22), which comprises an extended homily on salvation history — and, in particular, on the exodus experience, the pivotal event in Israel's history. Addison Wright says that Wisdom 11-19 represents the best single example in the Bible of a midrash, i.e., a composition that reflects on and explains the sacred text while attempting to adapt the message of the text for a later generation (*"Wisdom," The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1990). Structurally, a midrash may take the form of a verse-by-verse commentary, a sermon or a rewritten version of a homily. To understand the midrash text, it is necessary to take note of the summary with which the author began his homily and the principle to which he would repeatedly return throughout his writing.

In Wisdom 11:2-4, the author summed up Israel's survival and eventual emergence as a people in its own right due to God's predilection. It was Israel alone, of all the peoples of the earth, whom God had chosen, liberated and protected. Egypt, on the other hand, suffered punishment. According to the ancient sage's perception, God had command of all human history. Therefore, according to this interpretation,

blessings were rewards from God while sufferings were thought of as deserved punishment.

As part of his final antithetical comparison, Wisdom's author reminded his fellow believers in Alexandria of the blessings of their exodus experience. As was promised to the patriarchs (v. 6), the Lord preserved Israel, secured its freedom and gave them abundant progeny in a land of their own. All the promises to Abraham had been realized. By their faithful remembrance of their traditions and by devotedly celebrating Passover year after year, the people of Israel were renewed in their dedication to God, to whom they owed their existence and survival. Each time we come together to celebrate the Eucharist as a community, we remember our story, celebrate the exodus of Jesus from death to life and rejoice in the fact that Jesus has pioneered the way for all of us.

HEBREWS 11:1-2, 8-19

A nonbeliever reading the story of Abraham might conclude that he was a madman. Even Sarah laughed when he brought her the news that they were to have a son. However, she wasn't laughing when Abraham told Sarah they'd be moving to some far-off place, where they would have numerous descendants. No doubt Sarah would have been shocked at the fact that her husband was going to sacrifice their beloved only son, who was to be the first of those many descendants. How else could one explain such madness — except to realize that Abraham's faith went far beyond logic and common sense? He trusted God more than his own reasoning, and for that faith, he is revered as a father by Christians, Jews and followers of Islam.

Today's second reading, part of a longer section on faith and endurance (11:1-12:13), was not intended to be a *definition* of faith, although theologians in the early and medieval church considered it to be so. Rather, the ancient author of Hebrews intended this pericope to be a *description* of faith; verse 1 offers a description of the believer's subjective attitude toward God. Characterized by *realization* and *conviction*, the faith of the true believer is quite similar to that eager and trusting expectation later defined as hope.

Realization has sometimes been erroneously translated as "substance" or "essence" due to a misreading of *hypostasis*. But "realization" or "assurance" or even "guarantee" conveys the ancient author's intention more accurately. In Hellenistic culture, *hypostasis* referred to a plot of land that a person possessed by right. For

the readers of Hebrews, who would have been familiar with this usage of the term, *hypostasis* would have had special significance. Faith would have been understood as the believer's assurance that she or he already had a title of possession in eternity's kingdom. *Hypostasis* or "assurance" points to that which is not yet present but is confidently awaited. *Elenchos* or "conviction" pertains to that which, while it is a present reality, is not known except by faith.

A healthy balance of assurance and conviction enables believers to maintain both the existential and eschatological dimensions of faith. It is this balance of faith cooperating with grace that Kierkegaard chose to call the "leap of faith" (*op. cit.*). For Abraham, that meant surrendering his will, his logic and his hope to God. He could have argued his case before the Lord, but he did not. Instead, he acquiesced to God in faith, without full understanding. With assurance regarding the future and conviction in the present, we are to follow Abraham's lead, leaving behind all our fears, preconceived ideas and all else that may hinder authentic faith. Then, we can allow God to act, and, through us, become a more recognizable presence in our world.

LUKE 12:32-48

Today's Lucan Gospel is a compilation of parables and sayings on judgment and vigilance. It also exhibits evidence of all three stages of textual development: Jesus, the church, and the evangelist. In its original context during Jesus' ministry, the parable of the doorkeeper (vv. 35-38) was directed at Jesus' contemporaries in an effort to convince them that the master of the house, i.e., the messiah, had come among them in the person of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus was knocking at the doors of their hearts. Would they welcome him or not?

At the second level of development, within the Lucan church, the parable was understood to refer to Jesus' second coming. As his disciples, the earliest Christians were to be ever watchful and prepared for his appearance. Even if he came unexpectedly, like a prowler in the night, they were to be ready. Those who were ready would be served by the Lord himself at his messianic banquet.

In its third level of development, the parable was recast by the evangelist and infused with a Passover motif. "Gird your loins and light your lamps" (v. 35) was part of the traditional Passover rite, which commemorated the exodus (Exod 13:11). Luke pointed to the exodus as a type of Jesus' passing over from death to life. This

Christian Passover is remembered and celebrated at every eucharistic encounter.

Peter's question (v. 41) about the intended audience of the parable was not part of the original tradition and represents Luke's intention to apply the parable's message to the growing Christian community. The church is Jesus' little flock (v. 32), and because of that, believers are to be dependable and conscientious in their stewardship.

In its original context, the stewards or servants in Jesus' parable were the religious leaders of the people. They should have been open to what God was revealing to them in Jesus. But many were not. At its second level of development, the parable served as a warning to the leaders of the Jesus movement. Entrusted with the good news of God's great gift of salvation, they had great responsibility, and they would be held more accountable and judged (by God) to be more culpable if they neglected their responsibilities.

This notion regarding responsibilities and punishment reflects the Jewish notion of sin. Some sin because they do not know what they should be doing; they are not conscious, therefore they are less guilty than those who sin deliberately (Num 15:27-31; Deut 12-17; Psalm 19:12-13). Nevertheless, ignorance of the master's return — i.e., unawareness of the eschatological judgment — does not eradicate guilt. In fact, it results only in a lesser degree of punishment.

For the Christians of the late first Christian century, today's Gospel underscored the *certainty* of Jesus' return and counseled them to be watchful and prepared. As the interim between Jesus' advents has stretched into 20 centuries, the call to exercise responsible stewardship has not diminished. We cannot become insensitive or indifferent. Rather, we are to continue to see and serve Jesus in the poor and persecuted. We are to continue feeding him in the hungry, clothing him in the naked, healing him in the sick and welcoming him in the lost and the lonely. This is the authentic preparation that will help us to recognize him when he comes. "Blessed is that servant whom the master on arrival finds doing so" (Luke 12:43).

Planning: 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's Gospel parable speaks of servants who did or did not do the master's will: "Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so."

Those who are entrusted with the responsibility of preparing good worship in the parish are stewards of a rich treasure. They are charged with doing the will of God by serving the members of the parish well, with responsible choices and good preparation.

That requires a lot of effort all through the year, though things do slow somewhat in the summer and autumn section of Ordinary Time. Solid planning also requires a lot of forethought — looking ahead to major feasts and seasons so that things are not left to the last minute. This also allows you to do some overall planning for a whole season rather than bouncing along one week at a time.

We are nearing the middle of that long period of Ordinary Time, so planners ought to have recovered from Lent and Easter by now. As the school year gears up and many activities resume in the parish, this could be a good time to do some advance planning for the coming liturgical year, which begins with Advent. Could planners set aside a day, or at least part of a day, to look ahead to the whole year and begin thinking about tasks that might take extra time before a feast or season?

Assuming you have been focusing on the Year of Mercy, ask yourself: What focus might you adopt for next year? The next year will follow the A Cycle of readings in the Lectionary, drawing mostly from Matthew for the Gospel texts. Planners might spend some time before their planning day reading that whole Gospel to see what themes might emerge. Reading the introduction to a commentary or two on that Gospel might help that process of discernment.

Such a planning day might begin with some evaluation of the current year. What worked well in each part of the year? What needs more attention next year? How can we build on what we did this year?

Also try to discern what areas might be getting overlooked because they aren't obviously a problem. Are all the various ethnic groups in the parish being well integrated into the worship? What about all age groups? Does more need to be done to move toward a more inclusive liturgy? What issues in the local community, the nation and the world need our attention in the coming months? Are there other ministries in the parish with whom you might cooperate to bring such issues to the fore and to integrate them appropriately in the prayer of the parish?

Prayers: 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

My friends, it's easy to put our faith on the back burner as we deal with life's demands. But today's Gospel is clear that we are always expected to be aware and prepared. Jesus usually shows up in our lives under unexpected circumstances and in unexpected people. We will only recognize these many opportunities if we're paying attention. We coast along at our own risk. Faith and readiness are lifelong attitudes, honed one careful day at a time.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you warned your disciples to be aware and prepared: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you said that the Son of Man would come unexpectedly: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to live with the same faith and awareness: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, we are aware of our needs and the needs of those around us, and so we pray for them.

Minister For the whole church: that we may live with deep faith and awareness even in the face of contrary evidence ... we pray,

- For those who have grown weary of believing or have lost faith ... we pray,
- For faith in the God of peace and for awareness of opportunities for peacemaking ... we pray,
- For faith in the God of justice and for the courage to work for a just world ... we pray,

- For faith in the God of healing and for the commitment to serve the sick and discouraged ... we pray,
- For faith in the God of truth and for the gift of discernment in a culture of exaggerations and half-truths ... we pray,
- For all who are suffering in our community and for renewed efforts to meet their needs ... we pray,
- For the sick, the dying and the grieving; for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider God who fulfills all promises, you call us into unknown territory and urge us to be open to unseen possibilities. Keep us alert when the duties of life distract us and when our focus on the coming of your kingdom wanes. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus, who calls us to be ready. Amen.

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