

Sermon for Advent 1
Is 64.1-9; Ps 80. 1-7 and 16-18; 1 Cor 1.3-9; Mk 13.24-37

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Over and over again during Advent we will hear words that have to do with expectation or waiting. We will hear about Israel's wait for the Messiah; we will hear about the Church's wait for the Messiah's return.

What do you think of when you hear the word "waiting"? I think of sitting in the doctor's office or the dentist's office, waiting to be seen. Or, I think of people waiting at the bus stop reading a newspaper, looking at their watches, perhaps humming. Anything to pass the time until the bus comes. There's nothing they can do to hasten its coming or to delay it. They just have to wait.

There is too much of this kind of vestibule Christianity that has been promoted. But, the waiting that is to characterise the church of God, a waiting we proclaim during Advent, is not a passive sitting but an active expectation. It is not vestibule or bus-stop waiting; it is investment waiting. Let me give you a picture of this. Imagine a serious investor or a trader on Wall Street. He's not looking at his watch, casually reading a newspaper, or humming. He's constantly watching, looking around for an opportunity, waiting actively for just the right moment, for just the right set of circumstances, and then he leaps, because the right moment must be grasped and seized. Time, no matter what his watch says, is measured not by the regular schedule of the bus line but by how much he can do and get done.

Advent is a time not for mere waiting, sitting around and twiddling our thumbs waiting for something to happen; Advent is a time when we will hear God through His Word telling us to look around, seize the opportunities afforded to us. Jesus does not call us merely to wait but to expect.

This was surely clear from the reading we had two weeks ago when Bp. Peter was here. You remember the story Jesus told in the Gospel reading for that week: a wealthy man went on a trip and entrusted his servants with some of his wealth. To one servant he entrusted 5 talents, to another 2, and to another 1. Then, he left. How long he was going to be gone, or how long he was gone, it doesn't say and it doesn't matter. But, when he did return, he found that the one who had been given the 5 talents and the one who had been given 2 talents had both doubled the number they had been given, but the servant who had been given only 1 talent had simply hidden his talent in the garden and waited. What did the master do on his return: he commended the servants who had been active and had doubled the amounts they had been given and allowed them to keep their wealth and he rebuked the one who had simply waited and took what he had been given and gave it to the one who had the most.

Why does Jesus tell his followers this parable? Just as Israel was not simply to bury the treasure that had been given to it until some distant future date, so the followers of Jesus are not to sit in the vestibule or mill around the church like a bus stop, looking at their watches, waiting for a God who never comes, but rather are to be actively involved, busily involved, finding every opportunity to increase the master's yield.

But, why would anyone just sit around and wait? Well, if all they have is just a little bit to be carefully guarded, then they will not risk losing the little that they have. But, is it a little that they have?

Let's think about these talents that the servants were given? What are they? Not surprisingly, when some good souls look at the poor servant who was entrusted with only one talent, they think: "poor guy, he was only given one talent. I'm like him; if I were given just one of something, I wouldn't want to lose that one, little thing given to me either! I'd rather play it safe: bury the one little talent and wait!"

One little talent? Are you sure? First of all, it's not little in size: a talent was a stone or metal about as big as a tire and had to be carried around in a cart. Imagine how much 5 of them must have weighed! Second, its size tells you something about how much it was worth. We are not talking here about a penny, a dime, a quarter, a loonie or a toonie! A talent was worth 6,000 denarii! So, you ask, "Fr. Greg, how much is one denarius worth?" A denarius was the normal wage for a wage earner for one day's work. So a talent is worth 6,000 day's worth of wages. And 6,000 days of work is about 17 years. A talent is 17 years worth of wages.

Now compared with wages today, a day's wage then was probably a lot less than it is today. But, it still had to support a wage-earner and his family, even as it does today. So, let's consider how much the servants were given not in terms of money but in terms of what it represented. Let's assume that a wage-earner today needs \$30,000 to support his family. (I think that's too modest and doesn't really account for the fact that in most families today there is more than one wage-earner, but let's err on the conservative side for now.) But, even a conservative estimate would suggest that 1 talent alone was worth 17 years times 30,000, or over half-a-million dollars! That means that one servant was given over 85 years worth of wages or \$2 and a half million dollars, one was given over 34 years worth of wages or a million dollars, and the least was given 17 years worth of wages, or half-a-million dollars!

It's amazing but some people have all the riches of God available to them, but they hide them and just wait for the master to return. And they wait, and they wait, and they wait, and eventually they die. But there are others who, knowing that they have available to them, the riches of God, look around and try to find the right places to invest this incredible wealth.

I often wonder what people are thinking when they talk about waiting during Advent, or even what they mean when they repeat the words: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Is waiting for Christ to come again, or waiting during Advent, like waiting for the bus

that never seems to come or is it rather a time for looking for the opportunities that God gives us to invest the incredible riches in heaven that God gives us?

What does waiting mean for you? How much do you really believe that God can do far more than you can ask or imagine? How much do you really believe that God can put at your disposal the astounding riches of heaven? Or how much do you feel scared and limited by the little that you have experienced, unwilling to part with even the little that you have, and thus unwilling to do more than wait? What God calls us to at Advent is to be awake and alert, ready to invest the abundance that God has given us, for there is so much more where that came from.

During Advent, then, look around and be alert to where God is asking you to invest. May I encourage you to think about investing in your family, your work, your church community, your world. Look around: find the places where you can invest the riches that God has given you. Go forth and multiply during this Advent!