



Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Extended Advent Begins [Purple or Blue]

- [Revised Common Lectionary Readings](#)
- [Worship Notes](#)
- [Resources in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*](#)



“Keep your lamps lit and burning!” [Seven candles](#) (for seven weeks of “extended” Advent)

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Revised Common Lectionary Readings

See the texts, artwork and Revised Common Lectionary Prayers for this service at the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).)

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Para obtener más recursos leccionario, [Estudios Exegético: Homiléticos](#).

Lectionnaire en français, [Le Léctionnaire Ecuménique Révisé](#)

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25.

At the end of the conquest of Israel, Joshua exhorted the people to renew their covenant with God. The people of Israel responded by reaffirming their intent to remain faithful to God and by recalling their history with God.

Psalm 78:1-7 (UMH 799).

If chanting, use Tone 2 in D Minor (UMH 737).

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

The lectionary selection is the second part of the "meat" of this letter, addressing the church's need for clearer teaching about eschatology. The first part deals with sexuality. Recommendation: Read the whole chapter!

Matthew 25:1-13.

Toward the conclusion of his public teaching in the temple, Jesus warns his hearers to be ready like bridesmaids who brought sufficient oil for their lamps.

[Back to top.](#)

Worship Notes

Calendar

Advent officially begins November 30, but beginning **today**, the readings for each Sunday are already addressing the primary Advent theme of the return and final reign of Christ, making all things new. For resources to begin Advent celebrations a few weeks early using our current lectionary, check out [The Advent Project website.](#)



If you haven't started planning for Advent, it's time! [GBOD has an archived webinar](#) you can view yourself or with your planning team, a complete handout of the slides for the webinar, and a planning article exploring the texts in depth. The webinar provides at least *five different approaches for Advent and Christmas Season* planning to help you and your congregation celebrate each as fully as you can, as well as [links to hundreds of other Advent-related resources](#) on our website. For more specific guidance for planning Advent, see "[Planning Advent for Year B](#)" on this website.

Christ the King Sunday (Last Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A, or Third Sunday in Extended Advent, Year B) is November 23. It is a "bookend Sunday" for ordinary time after Pentecost (the other bookend is Trinity Sunday), on which all of the readings relate to each other around a common theme.

Christ the King is also a fairly recent addition to the Christian Calendar. It was first celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church in 1925 in response to attempts by governments in Mexico and elsewhere to declare themselves the ultimate authority in the lives and even the religions of their subjects.

Plan to celebrate Holy Communion on this day. See "[A Great Thanksgiving for Christ the King Sunday](#)." See also this [Call to Worship](#) and this [Service of Scripture and Song](#) that recapitulates the whole Christian Year.

How does your congregation keep Thanksgiving Day (USA)? How do folks keep it at home? New for 2014 is "[Thanksgiving Celebrations for the Home](#)." You can find it, and our many other resources, in our [Thanksgiving section](#).

November

All Month: [Native American Heritage Month](#)

November 9: [“Restored” or Extended Advent 1, Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday](#) (USA), [International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church](#)

November 11: [Veterans Day](#) (USA) ([GBHEM resources](#))

November 23: [Christ the King Sunday](#); Bible Sunday in [National Bible Week](#) (November 23-30) (USA)

November 27: [Thanksgiving Day](#) (USA)

November 30: [Advent \(Regular\) Year B Begins, United Methodist Student Day](#)

December

December 1 [World AIDS Day \(GBOD resources\)](#)

December 24/25 [Christmas Eve/Day](#) Resources

December 31 [Watch Night](#)

The First Sunday of (regular) **Advent** is November 30 this year, and we move into Year B of the lectionary (focus on Mark’s gospel, the stories of David’s family, and the epistles of Ephesians, Hebrews and James).

[Back to top.](#)

Atmospherics -- After Deliverance: Settling the Land of Promise

True to Our God, True to This Promised Land (See “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” UMH 519)

The concluding chapter of **Joshua** functions as both narrative and ritual closure for the period of conquest and initial settlement of the Promised Land. As narrative closure, this chapter marks the end of years of fighting and struggle. As a ritual closure, the people renew their commitment to serve YHWH alone, not their former gods (whether of Egypt or Iraq) and not the gods of the people among whom they now reside (Amorites are specifically named).

As narrative and as ritual, this story marks a different kind of rite of passage than the crossing of the Jordan we encountered last week. The crossing of the Jordan marked a *transition* from one place to another, and in the process from one form of life to another, from journeying to occupying. So while there were marked changes in some ways of life, the people were still on the move.

This week’s rite of passage marks a determination to “*stay put*,” both in the land recently conquered and divided, and in allegiance to YHWH and YHWH’s covenant with the people. If anything, this is an even more challenging transition, a change from movement to settlement, from acquisition to consolidation, from nearly constant transition to a kind of institutionalization.

Today’s reading portrays these kinds of changes, these movements toward permanent settlement and institutionalization, as signs of the fulfillment of God’s promises beginning with Abram and Sarai, and portrays this pivotal moment as a ritual moment of determining to continue to serve the God who had delivered them and brought them to this place, and this God alone.

In Your Planning Team

First question: Which way are you heading? Are you continuing to keep Ordinary Time with the stories of the Patriarchs, or are you taking up the beginnings of extended Advent today?

If you are beginning to celebrate Advent today, this text may be read through the Advent lens of readiness to profess and act upon ultimate loyalties at the brink of a new world. In this way, this text can be seen as complementary to the Epistle and Gospel readings today, both of which also have turned, starting today, to address what it takes to be ready for the age to come.

If you are simply continuing to focus on this stream of texts in Ordinary Time, remember you are close to the end of Ordinary Time texts. Next week marks the very end of them, with a reading from Judges that captures a refrain that will re-echo throughout the historical books: Once again, the people did what was evil in God's sight, God let them bear the consequences of that, they cried out for help, and God delivered them.

So think about how this week's text, and worship you build around it, prepares you for next week as the conclusion of this series. From one angle, one might say Joshua was right: "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God" (24:19 NRSV). Next week is just one of many texts that proves just how inveterately difficult it was (and is!) for God's own people to stay focused on their God, and not fall away into serving other gods.

But this has been precisely the challenge for which we keep Ordinary Time, is it not? This is the season in which the church focuses its energy on living out all it has been given, taking the call of Jesus to discipleship and the call of the Spirit to holiness with as much seriousness as we can muster. This week's text, then may lead you to focus on re-iterating that challenge, just as Joshua did for the people long ago.

At this point in the year, much "travel," apart from visiting family at Thanksgiving and Christmas, is over in the Northern hemisphere. We're heading into a time of "settling in" as winter approaches. And it's just here, we know from this week, and next, we may be most vulnerable. The battle's done and won. Will we show ourselves to be disciples of Jesus, or of some other Lord, in the face of the deep temptations to consumerism that face us at this time of the year?

Consider this text an invitation and a challenge to make a renewal of your covenant with God in worship today, especially if you did not do so in connection with last week's "crossing of the Jordan" text. You may find this [service of baptismal reaffirmation](#), used at General Conference in 2008, appropriate for the context. A [Spanish version](#) is also available. Or you may wish to focus specifically on the first of the vows—renouncing the spiritual forces of evil and repenting of sin—which derives from the basic covenant vows in this week's text.

[Back to top.](#)

I Thessalonians: "Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow"

Holiness now and for the Age to Come

I Thessalonians finally gets to the meat of Paul's concern for the church in this week's reading. As suggested above, plan to read and focus on the whole of the chapter, not just the lectionary selection. Both of these issues, sexuality and eschatology, are important, and the nature of both of these was such that Paul and company needed the long reintroduction we've read these past three weeks to bring them up.

At first glance, these two topics may appear to have little to do with each other, or at least to be in tension with each other. The gift of sexuality, after all, has much to do with continuing life as we know it. Eschatology, however, speaks boldly about the end of all things as we have known them, and thus the utter temporality and ephemerality of this life.

Paul presents both fully here, with no hint of tension between them. His call for abstaining from “fornication” (sexually impure actions) is grounded in his concern that Christian people learn how to control their bodily desires and channel them in ways that show a life of holiness and an intention to honor one’s partner, and in so doing to honor the life of the community (the body of Christ) that intends the same.

The call in verse 6 “not to defraud” probably refers to adultery. To engage in sexual relations with the marital partner of another is not simply to harm oneself but also to destroy the relationship with the partner’s spouse.

In a culture then (and in many places, now!) where relationships for one’s own “sexual fulfillment” (however that may be defined) are valued over other kinds of relational bonds, this commitment not to commit adultery was not and still is not quaint. Rather, it marks a radical commitment to God and to community, to being the body of Christ first and foremost. Truly being the body of Christ together is (or should be) the ultimate commitment of Christians to each other in the power of the Holy Spirit.

All forms of love are valid and expressed in the body of Christ—the love of God (agape), fellowship/friendship (philia), and the sexual love of marital life-partners (eros). For Christians, God’s love and mutual friendship provide the context for the expression of sexual love within marriage. This commitment to God and to community has the effect of strengthening bonds of cohesion among communities generally, and placing a check on merely selfish desires that may undermine life and trust at the community level.

Christians in many congregations and denominations in the United States talk a lot about sex and sexual purity. Christians have been leading sponsors in US society of sexual abstinence programs for teenagers, have been outspoken on reducing teen pregnancy and abortions, have opposed and worked for limitations to pornography and prostitution worldwide, and have generally been at least hesitant when not hostile to embracing forms of sexual expression not linked to a lifelong covenant of marriage. These are all fine things to do, and consistent with Christian teaching in general.

What we know, however, is that divorces among those who claim to be Christians are nearly as high as the rest of the US populations, and non-marital sexual relationships as well as pregnancy happen in similar proportions as well.

Perhaps this is a call to remember the audience Paul was addressing with his directives around sexuality. He was addressing the church itself, not society at large. He was not talking about what other people should do or oppose, nor about how the church should be an agent to help make people outside that community live according to Christian standards. He was addressing Christians as Christians, and more specifically, these specific Christians in Thessalonica in the context of their particular relationships with each other as members of the body of Christ. He seems to have very low expectations for “the Gentiles” (i.e., people not in the Jewish or Christian community) ever to live this way themselves. If they were ever to do so, it would be because Christians would show them how by their living example.

That’s what verses 9-12 address. Paul and companions commend the congregation for its demonstration of loving each other well (verse 9). And he calls them not to rest on these laurels. Rather, he says, “live quietly, mind your own affairs, and work with your hands.” In short, he calls them to take this way of life, this way of following Jesus and being his body in the world, seriously and soberly, not with a view primarily toward changing others, but rather with a view toward *being* the change themselves.

This is what saints do. They do not fix unfixable things or try to make the world come out right. They love God, neighbor and spouse, if they have one, living as shining lights of the world God is making right.

If in our lives we live quietly, soberly, expressing love in ways that reflect our calling to personal and corporate

discipleship and mission in the world, what of those who have died?

Verses 13-18, the verses included in this week's lectionary, provide some response. It would appear that serious questions had arisen within the Christian community at Thessalonica about what happens to the dead. It also appears that there was a variety of conflicting answers offered that had begun to cause confusion, if not division, among the believers.

Paul and his companions speak in these verses with direct authority, "by the word of the Lord" (verse 15), to eliminate any confusion. Christ acts decisively at his return, summoning the dead with his own shout, the archangel's call and the blast of God's trumpet. The dead are raised first, and then we who are still alive at Christ's coming will be "snatched up" ("raptured," it is sometimes translated) to meet Christ with them "in the air" (verses 16-17).

There are some matters that are uncertain, including the day and hour of Christ's return (attested in the synoptic gospels and in Acts) and how we will appear in the age to come. But Paul and companions here claim we can know with great clarity that Christ will return, summon the dead, and gather with his living disciples, in that order. All three of these points bear upon our living now. While some have used this text to argue that Paul was over-confident in expecting Christ's return immediately, the text itself does not make that point. Paul's confidence is in the promise of Christ's return, not the timing of that promise. Christ the Redeemer and Judge is surely coming. At *all times* in this life we must be ready for this, precisely because we do not know the day or hour.

The dead in Christ are raised first. The verb here refers not to merely physical raising up, but "resurrection," the full enlivening of body and soul into a form that is indestructible, what Paul describes in I Corinthians 15 as "a spiritual body." This verse does not address where or in what state the dead may be at this point. But it does affirm that the first to experience the fullness of resurrection will be the dead in Christ. This does not point to "pie in the sky by and by." Given the certainty of our mortality and death in this present age, we must be ready, here and now, in this life, especially since death comes at an unexpected hour. We need to be found "in Christ" before that time, whenever it may come.

After their raising comes the "snatching" of those who may be physically alive on that day. Exactly what happens to our existing bodies at that time is not clear. The verb "snatch" conveys again sudden, unexpected and decisive action by another, in this case by Christ's call, upon us. But the larger metaphor here is not, as N.T. Wright has pointed out in [*Surprised by Hope*](#), the "snatching," but the "meeting in the air." Snatching is simply a means to accomplish the meeting in the air. The meeting represents that of a welcoming committee that joins a coming king well before the king actually reaches the city gates.

In all three actions—the descent of Christ, the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the snatching of and meeting with the living—suddenness and decisiveness are the critical factors. All three will surely happen whether before or after we die. Our call now is both to encourage one another that these things will happen and to live in readiness.

Encourage one another that this life as we know it comes to a sudden and dramatic end? Encourage one another about this? Yes, says Paul. Yes. That is good news. It is full salvation, being "with the Lord forever." However much life in this age may become infused by the life of the age to come, it will only be in part. Full salvation comes with new creation, resurrection, new heavens and a new earth. That those things are surely coming is not a call to escapism from this life, but rather to diligence to manifest them as fully as possible, here and now, and to do so without the need for anxiety about the limitations of our capacities to do so. God's future drives our present at every point, in every relationship.

Paul's teaching "by the word of the Lord" about the end of this age is thus of one piece with his teaching earlier

about the nature of love within the Christian community and the proper contexts and motivations for sexual expression within that community. The coming redemption and judgment in Christ drive us to holiness of heart and life, including holiness in our sexuality, here and now.

In Your Planning Team

Again, where are you heading just now? Are you simply wrapping up the series in I Thessalonians this week and next, before moving on to Christ the King and “regular” Advent? Or are you beginning extended Advent today?

If you are beginning Advent today, of course you could not have asked for a better or perhaps more controversial epistle reading. [**Left Behind**](#) has returned to the theaters, and may still be playing at least in second run when this Sunday comes around. While United Methodist doctrinal standards do not include any theology of “rapture” (invented, wholecloth, in the nineteenth century), we do have a robust affirmation of the return of Christ in glory, raising the dead, judging all, and gathering the living to rejoice in new creation. (See John Wesley’s sermon, [**“The Great Assize”**](#)).

Advent is primarily about the culmination of all things in Christ, not as a merely abstract and speculative doctrine, but as a firm foundation for living in holiness here and now. And is that not exactly what this reading from I Thessalonians offers us, especially if we take the whole chapter into view?

So if you are starting Advent today, consider this text as “Perspective 2,” with the call to exclusive dedication to our God as Perspective 1 (Joshua) and the call to preparedness (Matthew) as Perspective 3. With three texts to consider, do not give much time to unpacking the “great snatch” or debunking Darby’s hyper-popularized (and not terribly Christian) rapturist eschatology. Focus on simply the positive, certain, hope-filled and life-transformation-inspiring message that Christ’s unexpected and unpredictable return calls us all to holiness here and now.

But if you are continuing in I Thessalonians and concluding next week, you may have the opportunity to unpack more of the direct connection between the two elements of the “meat” of this letter—sexuality and eschatology—and to celebrate both with joy. Sing love songs and hymns exalting marriage. Sing of the second coming. Pray for the coming of the Lord with passion, and bless all who seek to live in holiness in every aspect of their lives, including their sexuality.

[**Back to top.**](#)

Matthew: On Mission with the Master

Better Be Ready... to Celebrate!

The parable of the bridesmaids from **Matthew**’s gospel was and remains a serious call to a readied life in the here and now. What is often missed in conversations about “readiness for the end,” however, is readiness for celebration. The readiness Jesus speaks of here is readiness to meet *and rejoice* in the presence of covenant fulfilled.

Often, when we think of readiness to “meet our maker,” we think of what has to be given up or pared away. There is value in that, too. But this story points toward a readiness of being *filled*, not emptied. This is a readiness of confident rejoicing, not fearful or hesitant wondering. And so it is about building a life that is characterized by such readiness to rejoice, being filled with the Spirit at all times.

In contemporary US culture, joy is often associated only with spontaneity. In reality, happiness may be spontaneous. But joy and its accompanying readiness to rejoice at all times are the products of a disciplined life of holiness. Perhaps some few may seem to have a “natural talent” for this. But the vision of this parable is that such joy is intended for all. The parable invites all to be disciplined enough to receive it.

So it was with some of the bridesmaids in this parable the story Jesus tells. They had anticipated that the bridegroom may be delayed, and so had taken the time, money and effort to stock up and bring extra lamp oil with them. Because they were ready, they could rejoice with the Bridegroom’s party at his arrival.

But some were foolish, and did not bring enough oil to supply their lamps. Perhaps they had failed to think through what they really needed to bring. Perhaps they were rushing at the last minute. But for whatever reasons, they had not prepared adequately to be able to join the party. So when they finally arrived, late, they were not admitted, nor even recognized.

Saints are not merely those who deny themselves. They are those who ready themselves by all the means of grace to celebrate the joy of God’s salvation. Self-denial is part of that readiness. But so is thoughtful planning and preparation of more than enough.

In Your Planning Team

Again, where are you today? Are you wrapping up a series in Matthew at the end of Ordinary Time? Or are you beginning extended Advent with a bang?

As we’ve already noted, it’s hard to imagine any better collection of texts to kick off a serious and celebratory Advent. And this one is no exception. For too long, this text, though, has a history of being used on this Sunday more as admonition than invitation. It has focused more on those who were not ready to rejoice, than those who were. Both, in fact, are in view, but the larger context is a wedding feast, an occasion of celebration. Those who weren’t ready to celebrate missed out. Those who were did not—and do not.

So as you design worship around this text today, whether for Advent or Ordinary Time, don’t do so peevishly. Do so lavishly. No doubt you have people in your congregation who have become masters of the disciplines that keep them ready for joy, ready to celebrate whenever the Bridegroom comes. Find these people. Someone on your worship planning team may know at least one or two. Talk with them about their personal practices that sustain a readiness to rejoice and how they have both found and offered support to others for this way of life.

Then look at the ways your congregation already has processes in place to help others build and sustain a similar way, or begin to address the steps it takes to build new processes that do.

And lift them up, celebrate them, and invite folks into this way of life that makes them ready to celebrate not just these folks and processes around them, but the one who is the font of all joy, whose coming is here described as nothing less than a lavish wedding feast.

For imagery for worship built around this text, think about images of abundance, of fullness to overflowing—grain bins spilling over, fountains gushing, people singing and dancing, full of life and joy. Then take a look behind the scenes for each of these to the discipline, the hard work it took to achieve this overflowing, whether the planting and care for the fields, or the construction of the fountain and its plumbing (and the years of apprenticeship to become a plumber!), or the hard work that dancers and singers invest in their art.

Advent is here—or will soon be! Be ready... to celebrate.

[Back to top.](#)

Resources in *The United Methodist Book of Worship/UM Hymnal* with Links to Other Suggestions

Greeting:

- BOW 450 (Matthew, 1 Thessalonians)
- BOW 455 (Joshua)

Opening Prayer:

- BOW 468 (Joshua)
- BOW 472, Act of Congregational Centering (Joshua)

Acts of response to the Word:

- BOW 510, Prayer for Discernment (Joshua)
- BOW 511, Prayer for God's Reign (Matthew, I Thessalonians)
- BOW 513, Prayer for Justice (1 Thessalonians)
- BOW 528, Prayer of Susanna Wesley (Matthew)
- BOW 529, Prayer of Saint Patrick (All Saints)
- UMH 656 "If Death My Friend and Me Divide" (1 Thessalonians)

Confession:

- BOW 483 (Joshua, Matthew)
- BOW 490 (Joshua, Matthew)

Concerns and Prayers:

- ○ BOW 548, On the Anniversary of a Death (1 Thessalonians)
- **Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Republic of Congo, Gabon, Sao Tomé and Principe**

The Great Thanksgiving:

- BOW 54-55, "The Great Thanksgiving for Advent" or "For the Season after Pentecost" (70-71)

Prayer of Thanksgiving if there is no Communion:

- BOW 551 (Joshua)
- BOW 556 (Psalm)

Dismissals/Blessings/Benedictions

- Blessing: BOW 562 (Joshua)

Get Your Feet Wet! 21st Century Liturgy for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

by Safiyah Fosua

Gathering Meditation: "Get Your Feet Wet!"

(Based on Joshua 3:13-17)

We all know that miracles come from God, but sometimes we forget that there are times when God asks us to participate in the miraculous. The Red Sea parted after Moses raised his staff as God commanded (Exodus 14:16, 21). The Jordan River, the dividing line between the Wilderness and the Promised Land, did not part until the priests placed their feet in the water as God commanded. Not until the priests placed their feet in the water . . .

The Bible speaks nothing of clergy and laity. It speaks of the priesthood of all people of God (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Even without the rigors of denominational ordination, all are priests called to stand as a bridge between God and people who long for God. We who love God are called to get our feet wet so that others might experience a miracle. I have seen these people -- taking risks for others. I have seen them, suffering inconvenience, serving others. Where have you last seen them? They are among us, refusing to be silent, refusing to pretend that they didn't see injustice, taking the road less traveled, as God commands.

The call to us today is to remember that we are all priests. This text hints that some miracles require our participation. Do you dare get your feet wet?

Call to Worship

(Based on Matthew 23:2-3, 1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Leader: Thanks be to God for the good news of the gospel! Through this truth, we are being transformed into the image of God.

People: We lay aside everything that weighs us down and turn our attention toward the God who has redeemed us (Hebrews 12:1).

Leader: Put away old ways to be clothed with the new self, created in the image of our Creator (Colossians 3:10).

People: We put away old destructive ways to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (Colossians 3:12).

Leader: We refuse to live like the Pharisees who did not practice what they taught.

People: We give thanks for God's transforming grace at work among us. Thanks be to God for the good news of the gospel!

Invitation to Discipleship for November 9, 2014

by Heather Lear

November 9, 2014 -- Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

I want to credit my colleague, Taylor Burton-Edwards, for challenging me to look at the Matthew passage in a fresh way. Often when we read these parables about “readiness,” we focus on the need to be ready to face judgment and account for our sins; and we can begin to feel the butterflies churning in our stomachs and thoughts of fear and uncertainty race through our mind. Yet, what is the setting of the parable? A wedding! A seven-day feast of eating, drinking, and celebrating, in which the whole community is invited and included in the festivities. The bridesmaids’ job isn’t to be ready for tribulation and difficult times. Their job is to be ready to help in the celebration!

Looking at this story with fresh eyes, I automatically thought of my friend, Joyce, who passed away earlier this year from cancer. Following her initial diagnosis a decade ago, Joyce’s life motto became “Rejoyce!” During her years of remission, she lived life as a celebration, helping whomever she could, and tirelessly raising money and awareness for breast cancer research. When the cancer returned last year, her life motto remained steadfast, even when treatments were stopped. She was saddened to leave her family and miss major milestones in the lives of her children, but she was confident and ready to rest in the arms of her Creator. She wasn’t afraid, and she looked forward to being pain- and cancer-free. And the challenge to “Rejoyce!” lives on in her family and friends, as many have taken on her causes. I recently saw a picture of her husband, post-joint replacement surgery, displaying a “REJOYCE” sign in the background.

Questions to Consider:

How have you presented the readiness parables? Are your people anticipating the arrival of the bridegroom with joy or anxiety? Does your congregation regularly celebrate together as preparation for celebrating the day the bridegroom does return?

- [Notes for Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25](#)
- [Notes for 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)
- [Notes for Matthew 25:1-13](#)

Notes for [Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25](#)

In the previous reading from Joshua we considered how rituals help us to transition from one status in life to another. I pointed to the work of Arnold van Gennep in his groundbreaking study on cultural [Rites of Passage](#),

and suggested that the description of the passage of the chosen people over the Jordan River and into the Promised Land was a kind of liturgical re-enactment of previous safe passages from one place or one station in life to another by the Israelites.

According to Joshua, thanks to the powerful hand of God that was with them, after the Israelites arrived in the Promised Land, they were able to quickly and successfully defeat its indigenous inhabitants, the Canaanite people, and take possession of what God had given to them. Joshua's story is different from the story told in next week's passage from Judges. In the Judges account, the conquest of the land was a long and difficult process that took two hundred years to accomplish before the high point in Israel's political history was reached under the rule of the kings.

Nevertheless, in today's passage, we hear Joshua's eloquent reminder to the people of how the Lord has been faithful to the chosen people and provided for them in a sustained all the way back to the time of Abraham. Therefore they should respond to the Lord's faithfulness by keeping the covenant with their sovereign God. Joshua calls them to commitment, saying, "Choose this day whom you will serve. . .[but] as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." The people respond by making a promise to serve and obey the Lord God alone.

How often do we call upon our people to make a choice to serve the Lord God shown in Jesus Christ alone? How often do we call people to stop worshiping the many other gods that pervade their lives? What other "gods" do we routinely put before our service to God?

Invite the people in your study group to reflect upon the many "gods" and "idols" that compete for their time, attention, and energy.

- What have they relied on instead of the Lord God for a sense of self-worth, help, or security? Be specific.
- Are there ways in which we have made these objects, ideas, or relationships "idols" that have displaced our need for God in our lives?
- How do we discern which objects/ideas/relationships come from God and which do not, and which may in fact get in the way of our reliance on God?
- What could be different if we put our reliance upon and relationship with God first? What would we need to do to make that happen?

[Back to top.](#)

[**Notes for 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**](#)

As we inch ever closer to end of the Christian Year and the beginning of the season of Advent (or perhaps have already moved into a season of extended Advent), we are reminded of the fact that the early Christians expected Jesus to return to rule in final glory during their lifetimes. However, they were also dealing with the reality that some of their brothers and sisters in the faith were not living to see his return. And so they wondered about the fate of those who died before he came back. Would those who died get to see him before those who remained behind awaiting his return to the earth? Would they get to see him at all?

Paul offers a word of hope to the Thessalonians by affirming that God's faithfulness and generosity transcend death. Whether they, or any of us, live to see the return of Christ or not, through the resurrection of Jesus we are all promised eternal life with. As we are reminded through our ritual of Holy Communion, by the Spirit of

Christ Jesus our Lord, we are made “one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet” (A Service of Word and Table I, *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, 10).

While none of us knows exactly how we will come into God’s kingdom when we die, or how exactly how we will be reunited with those who have gone before us—whether there will be a trumpet call and a swirling in the air, pearly gates and streets of gold, or something entirely beyond what our earthly imaginations can describe—we do all share in the common hope for a life after death that Jesus has promised us.

What does this have to do with us today, who do not necessarily assume, as the people in the early church did, that Christ’s return will occur during our lifetimes? What does it mean for those of us who confess we do not know the day or the hour when Christ will come to reign over his earthly kingdom? And with all of the focus among today’s young people on what the end times might look like and what might cause it according to the latest dystopian novel or movie, what are we as Christians to say about this aspect of our faith?

Whatever we say, it needs to be grounded in the kind of hope that Paul offers in his letter to the Thessalonians. And whatever else we say from the pulpit, we need to be regularly offering hope for eternal life. It seems especially important in this day and age to not provide answers for things about which none of us knows the details. But it is equally important to proclaim our faith in the promises of Jesus.

We must do that boldly, not only at the time of a person’s death, but through taking the opportunity to preach about texts such as this one when they come around in the lectionary. If you have not preached on the hope we have for eternal life in Jesus Christ lately, I would urge you to do so on this second to the last Sunday of the Christian year.

[Back to top.](#)

Notes for Matthew 25:1-13

How prepared are your members to welcome Christ when he returns to his earthly Kingdom? Are they prepared to stand before him, right now, today, if their time comes? If they are not, what are they going to do about it? When are they going to get ready?

These are the question posed by the Scripture lesson today, and the questions that confront us on these final Sundays of this Christian year. Indeed, these are the questions that we continue to wrestle with as we prepare the way for the coming of the Lord during the season of Advent.

In these final addresses that Jesus gives to the crowds who have come to hear him speak, Jesus’ message becomes very clear and focused: if you are not prepared to stand before God, then you better get to working on it, because no one knows the day nor the hour that he or she will be called to accountability.

Jesus stresses that since we don’t know when it is going to happen, we should be prepared and ready at all times. And once again Jesus uses something that would have been very familiar to everyone who heard it to communicate the seriousness of his message.

The parable of the wedding attendants uses images from a typical Palestinian wedding to illustrate the point. Just like we would all know that when “Here Comes the Bride” starts playing we’re all supposed to stand up because the bride is about to make her big entrance, the folks hearing this parable would have known that part of the ceremony in a Palestinian wedding included the groom going to the house of the bride’s father to finalize the wedding contract. At the bride’s house, the groom would greet the family, exchange gifts, and have a bite to eat, and in fact, this is where he may have gotten delayed in the story we heard today. After that, he would return with his bride to his own house where the wedding would be finalized. This was all part of the ceremony.

The job of the bridesmaids in all of this was to wait outside to light the path and welcome the bride and groom to the house. This was, of course, in the days before everything was lit by electricity. The only light at night would have come from the moon and the stars above, and the small, hand-held lamps of the people below.

Maybe you have been to a place (or live in a place if you are lucky!) where there is no light pollution. If so, talk about what that experience was like when compared with living in places where electric lights illuminate not only the city below, but the sky above, effectively diminishing the brightness of the sun and stars against the backdrop of a pitch black sky. Many people have a hard time imagining the importance of the bridesmaids’ role because we live in a world lit up by electric lighting.

So even though we might be initially annoyed with the wise bridesmaids for refusing to share their oil with those who ran out, the point of the story is that in order to fulfill their duties, they needed to make sure that at least some of the lamps would be burning when the wedding party arrived, rather than have the whole procession ruined by spreading what oil they had left among too many lamps, which could have created a situation of no lighting on the path. By their lack of foresight and preparation, the foolish attendants had actually risked bringing shame to the groom and his family on his big day, and so as punishment for their lack of attentiveness to their duties, they ended up not being allowed to attend the rest of the wedding.

The point Jesus is making in telling this story is that we are supposed to live our lives every single day so as to brighten the path of the Lord’s arrival. We are to add to the celebration rather than risking shame and grief on that day. We are to not only be prepared for the expected, but to be prepared for the *unexpected*. And no matter how long it takes, no matter how long we have to wait, we are warned not to fall back into a lifestyle that shows laziness or neglect of the things that will bring honor to Christ at the time of his arrival.

So how are we to do this? How are we to make sure that we are ready and prepared at all times, and not running out of lamp oil or falling asleep on the job? I believe as a United Methodist that this is where the church community can really help us.

I think it is hard to be fully prepared if we are left on our own to get ready. We need one another to help us get ready. We need others to hold us accountable, to help us be vigilant in our learning and in our living, and to help us understand what it is that the Lord requires of us. I suppose it is possible to get ready mostly on your own, to read the Bible by yourself and pray and study and prepare solo. But I think it is a much easier path for most people to prepare as part of a community of faith. It is, in fact, the hallmark of the Methodist way.

Think back over your own life about how the community of faith has helped you to get ready to come face to face with Christ. Invite others to share their stories or ask if they will give a witness as part of the sermon or as a response to the word proclaimed.

Were they ever part of a Sunday school class as a child? a youth group? a college Bible study group? How many church communities have they been a part of in their lifetimes? How did each group they were a part of help them to understand better what it means to follow Christ? How did the groups hold them accountable to their Christian commitments? Were there instances in which they were helped along in their Christian growth

by people with whom they disagreed?

We learn and grow in Christ from the people with whom we try to practice his ways in our daily living. Sometimes it is very hard to do that, just like sometimes it is very hard to love the members of our own families.

I'm sure it was very disappointing for the bridesmaids who ran out of oil that their sisters refused to share with them, refused to help them save face in their moment of failure. I read that story, and I feel bad for those women who had not thought ahead to take along some extra oil with them in case things didn't go as smoothly as was planned. I feel bad for them because I know that we all fail to do things to the best of our abilities sometimes. I'm sure they didn't mean any harm. I'm sure they didn't intend to risk bringing shame to the groom and his family. I'm sure they didn't mean to be foolish. I'm sure they were very sorry for their mistakes.

And likewise, I'm sure that those women who had thought to bring along some extra oil didn't want to refuse their sisters' requests for help. If it had been the wise thing to do, I'm sure they would have gladly shared. Unfortunately, in this situation, the wise thing to do was not to spread the oil around among too many lamps and risk having all of them extinguish.

Sadly, some of the women had to pay a high price for their lack of foresight. They quickly ran out to buy some more oil, but while they were gone the wedding party arrived; and so when they got back, the door had been closed and they weren't allowed in.

It happens. People make mistakes, and unfortunately sometimes someone has to pay a price. Sometimes it is the pastor, sometimes it is a person or a family in the church. We all wish it were not that way, but sometimes it just is; and it is tragic for all of us. It hurts.

Just like in our families, in the church what we have to do when this happens is we have to try to learn from our mistakes and forgive one another and be thankful for those who have caused us to learn important lessons, even when they are painful lessons. This is as important a part of being the church as any other.

- When has the church you serve learned a lesson through a difficult or painful experience?
- How did it help the church to grow?
- How can we find hope and strength even within the inevitable struggles that come to the congregation as we seek together to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ?

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[Back to top.](#)

Hymns

BOW - *The United Methodist Book of Worship*
CLUW - Come, Let Us Worship (Korean)

MVPC - Mil Voces Para Celebrar (Spanish)
 SOZ - Songs of Zion
 TFWS - *The Faith We Sing*
 UMH - *The United Methodist Hymnal*
 URW - *Upper Room Worshipbook*
 WSM - *Worship & Song*, Music Edition
 WSW - *Worship & Song*, Worship Resources Edition

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW
Awesome God				2040				
Battle Hymn of the Republic	717				24			
Christ Beside Me				2166				
Come, Let Us Use the Grace Divine	606					135		
Dear Lord, Lead Me Day by Day	411		100					
Freedom Is Coming				2192				
Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah	127							
Holy Ground				2272				
I Have Decided to Follow Jesus				2129				
I Will Trust in the Lord	464		292		14			
Lord, What a Cloud of Witnesses!								
Near to the Heart of God (There Is a Place of Quiet Rest)	472		324					
O Happy Day, That Fixed My Choice	391							
One God and Father of Us All				2240				
Stand Up and Bless the Lord	662		128					
Surely the Presence of the Lord Is in This Place	328	344	215					
The Family Prayer Song				2188				

When We All Get to Heaven (Sing the Wondrous Love)	701	383	381		15			
Matthew 25:1-13	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW
Deck Thyself, My Soul, with Gladness	612							
I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord	540							
I Want to Be Ready	722				151			
Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning								
Let There Be Light	440							
O Jesus, I Have Promised	396	214						
Ten Bridesmaids Waited for the Time								
Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying	720							
We Are God's People			2220					

November 9, 2014

Holy God, we are in awe of you. In marvelous ways, you have brought us out of trouble into safety, out of bondage into freedom. With our whole heart, we want to serve you faithfully, following Christ your Son. When we stumble and stray from your way, you call us back and forgive us. Help us to set all our hope on you, for your love never fails! It is by your generosity that we present these gifts and offerings. Use them to help others in our community and across the world to know your great love. We ask this through Christ, our risen Lord. Amen. (*Joshua 24*)

See [Offertory Prayers and Invitation for November 2014](#)

[Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday](#)

[God, Each Day You Give Is Precious \(A Hymn for Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday/Donor Sabbath\)](#)

[International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church](#)

[The Advent Project](#)

Green

- [Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25](#)
- [Psalm 78:1-7 \(UMH 799\)](#)
- [I Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)
- [Matthew 25:1-13](#)

