

Anticipation. Preparation. These are words we in the church generally associate with the season of Advent as we ready ourselves for the birth of the Christ child. Yet here, tucked inside of the parable of the 10 bridesmaids Jesus is calling us: to prepare, to be ready, to open our minds, hearts and souls now to Christ's inbreaking. We've got to prepare, because we never know when that moment will come, and we won't want to be late.

Although she didn't write the lyrics of her hit song, Anticipation, with Christ's second coming in mind, Carly Simon captured the essence of what it is to anticipate, to long for someone or something. She wrote:

*We can never know about the days to come,  
but we think about them anyway.  
And I wonder if I'm really with you now,  
or just chasin' after some finer day.  
Anticipation. Anticipation.  
Is makin' me late, is keeping me waitin' .  
-Carly Simon*

Whether it's waiting for a loved one, anticipating a next chapter, or bracing ourselves for change, her lyrics invite us to reflect on our own experiences of yearning, and more importantly, to connect to the emotions that accompany the anxiety we feel when facing the unknown.

Waiting can be bittersweet. We can feel compassion for the teenager who spends hours readying themselves for that big date, only to find themselves waiting for the date that never shows up. Or we can relate to those who because they are shy, preoccupied, or generally unaware, recognize their feelings for another too late, and tragically find that their opportunity for love has passed.

Elemental to our Christian faith is the experience of reflecting on the past, living in the present as an active and engaged disciple of Christ, *and* anticipating a future day when Christ will return for us. We may call upon Jesus' words and example to help us navigate what it means to be a disciple who loves God, neighbor and self, and with the Spirit's help, we can consciously prepare ourselves for that which we can only imagine and anticipate. Jesus tells us that no one except God knows the day or time of His return. And if we're honest, none of us likes not knowing. Because how can we be ready if we don't know what or when or how?

This too was a challenge for Matthew's church, and two millennia later it's still a challenge. It is easy to lose sight, or even hope for the prospect of Christ's return happening any time soon, let alone in our lifetime. It seems so far out of reach, and such unrealized anticipation can leave us weary. While we must acknowledge that our own deaths are inevitable, the how and when of Jesus' return is something we can't know. We can only hope and pray that we will be ready for that someday when we with all the faithful living and the dead will be called up into glory.

Yet, maybe more important than sitting at the ready for Christ's return, is our present journey — and how we prepare ourselves for God's inbreaking — not just in the future, but today.

A colleague of mine said, "How foolish we all are: we think that "we" are waiting for Christ's return, and for God to show up, but Christ is already in the midst of us. He isn't somewhere waiting for a moment to find us unprepared or unworthy — quite the contrary — He is here, right now, calling out to us, beckoning us to wake up — to be alert, to be present, ready to engage." <sup>1</sup> Because when we're prepared, we don't have to worry or be afraid. When we're prepared, our hearts, minds, and souls are made ready to welcome & receive Christ right now.

Evelyn Underhill, mystic and author wrote, "Our spiritual life depends upon his coming to us, far more than our going to him. Every time we make a channel, or a pathway for Him to enter into our lives, (essentially getting rid of barriers and distractions), He comes. Every time (we open) our hearts to Him he enters, bringing the fresh gift of his very life, and it is on that life we can depend... We think we need to be coming to God, but what if the invitation is for us, in our preparing, to clear the way for God to come to us, to enter in. What if in making ourselves ready, prepared, and willing to encounter Jesus every day, He meets us right where we are?"

So how are we to prepare?

We may begin by inviting Jesus in, through prayer, in dialogue and by listening for his voice. It's up to us to be sure that our lanterns have sufficient oil, so that they may shine brightly, making a pathway for God into our hearts. Placing Christ at the center of our lives ensures that we are always present and ready for God's inbreaking. Next, we can choose to show up ready to engage: in church, bible study, in ministry and mission, in community — for it is in each of these that we can and do encounter Christ.

If we hold that God is in our midst right now, guiding and leading us, and anticipate that beyond this mortal life there is the promise of a greater life in Christ, we surrender any foolishness we might have for wisdom.

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Kristine Johnson

But to be consciously present to both of these requires a commitment to preparation, to getting our houses and souls in order, and sometimes that means we have to deal with things that aren't so comfortable or easy.

Today after the 10 am service, many of us will gather for one of these conversations as we explore what it looks like to be ready: to prepare for our own death. It is something that can be uncomfortable to talk about yet when we take the time and make the effort to prepare ourselves, we eliminate our anxiety and fear and find that what's left is a space for the expression of love. When we are prepared, we may fully embrace life in the present, with ease. We will wonder and we will anticipate, but we won't worry, because what we have set our attention to is today.

And isn't this what Jesus wants for us? Not to be worried, or anxious about what is to come, but to be able to trust that God is with us now, and will always be, and that each time we clear the way for Christ to dwell within us, that our preparation will ensure that we'll be ready.

When I went to CREDO, the Episcopal Church Clergy Conference, last May, I was invited to focus upon my life and well being for a whole week. It began with Physical and Spiritual well-being, then emotional, then vocational and finally, financial. Yes, I had the opportunity to meet other clergy and to share a meal or conversations, but what CREDO was really about was preparation. Preparation in THIS moment, and it helped me to identify places where I had not prepared, the conversations and tasks I had been avoiding, and it helped me to find the strength to choose powerfully to prepare. Calling Christ into the center of each of these areas of my life, and preparing better has given me peace, ease and the freedom to live confidently until Christ returns.

Jesus makes clear that his followers must be ready. Although we do not know the day or hour of Christ's return, we are asked to anticipate with hope what is to come, to trust in God's love for us, and to the best of our ability, with intention and integrity, to practice faithful discipleship with open hearts and minds, so that we may anticipate and be ever ready for God's breaking in.