

by J. Michael Byron

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and pray together.

LEADER: Merciful God, you call us in the midst of our fears—

ALL: to respond to you with joy and gladness.

LEADER: Embrace us even as we draw back.

ALL: Put new courage in our hearts as we step out in faith into your future. Amen.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



“Call waiting” signals that others are trying to contact me. The e-mail backlog lengthens on the screen. A co-worker is hanging around the office door, hoping to speak with me. The temptation to forget the whole thing becomes overwhelming.

When it comes to understanding computer technology, I am almost hopeless. I have really tried, but I can’t seem to catch on to self-help operations that other people find simple. As a result, I am a regular caller to the user “help line.”

The helpers are cordial and competent, but they must shake their heads at some of my crises. Usually they are busy, so I do a lot of waiting.

An automated voice directs me to stay on the line and assures me my call will be handled in the order received. What I don’t know, though, is whether they have twenty calls ahead of mine or two, whether I will be chained to the phone for thirty seconds or thirty minutes. The voice can’t tell me in advance whether my call is worth the wait.

What happens if I need to leave my desk for thirty seconds to retrieve a file or a book from across the room? What if that is the very moment when the live voice patches in, and I’m not there to hear it?

The dreaded phone queue is only a nuisance, not a catastrophe, but I balk at sacrificing whole blocks of productive work hours to waiting. The longer I spend idling on a silent line, the greater the urge to forsake the process.

Expectant waiting has been part of the Judeo-Christian story from the very beginning. Frustratingly, God has been confounding our expectations and schedules for just as long. “How fortunate are those servants whom the master finds alert when he returns,” says Sunday’s gospel. How can our Christian waiting be more than a foolish waste of time and opportunities?

● For what are you willing to stay in line and wait?



GOSPEL

Where is your treasure?

JESUS 1: Do not live in fear, little flock. It has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make investments that never depreciate; establish inexhaustible accounts for yourselves in the heavens. For wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be, too.

JESUS 2: Be dressed for hard work; keep your lamps burning. Be like people expecting their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open up for him the moment he comes and knocks. How fortunate are those servants whom the master finds alert when he returns! I assure you, he will put on an apron and seat them at the table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the late night or the early morning, how fortunate those servants will be!

JESUS 3: But bear this in mind: if a householder could know just when the thief would break in, the householder would never leave the house to be broken into! You have to be ready the same way, for the Son of Man will come at an hour you don't expect.

PETER: Lord, are you directing this parable at us, or is it for everyone?

JESUS 1: Consider this: who is the faithful and wise servant whom the master can leave in charge of

the household, to keep everyone fed on schedule? How fortunate are those servants when the master finds them doing this! I assure you, that kind of servant will be put in charge of the estate!

JESUS 2: But if a servant imagines, "My master is delayed," and begins to abuse the other servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk—that servant's master will come on an unexpected day, at an unknown hour, and that servant will be punished and thrown among the faithless. The servant who knew the master's wishes but made no preparations to carry them out will receive a severe beating. But the servant who did nothing, unaware of the master's wishes, will receive only a light beating.

JESUS 3: You see, from those to whom much has been given, much will be required; from those to whom much is committed, how much greater the demand!

Luke 12.32-48



unpredicted delay in the glorious return of Christ.

It is no small matter that history has continued to march forward long after Easter Sunday, that we must struggle with the effects of sin and evil, and that the world didn't end as scheduled. (If you are reading this, it still hasn't.)

Many early Christians expected Jesus' second coming in glory—the parousia—to be immanent. Its delay forced the churches of the first century to ask questions, perhaps none with more direly personal consequences than whether believers have been wrong all along.

Just as in the case of waiting in the phone queue, a point arrives during the long, long silence when prudence suggests abandoning the project. A time comes to reassess the presumptions upon which we base our hope.

● Tell about a time of having to reassess your Christian hopes.

In Sunday's gospel Luke confronts a church whose very leaders seem to teeter on the brink of doubt and despair as many Catholics do today in the wake of sexual abuse scandals. The sayings and parables Luke gathers together describe the kind of faithful servants a master can leave in charge of a household and be certain everyone is fed on schedule.

What have we invested in the reign of God?

The Christian community for whom Luke writes faces a theological problem. The risen Lord Jesus looks to be late in bringing about

the end and fulfillment of time and history. Luke seems to feel compelled in Sunday's gospel to gather together sayings and parables that account for an

He describes the kind of wise servants ready at any hour for a master's return from a wedding feast.

Half way through Sunday's gospel passage Jesus' disciples ask if his teaching is for them or for everyone. Jesus responds by contrasting faithful and wise servants with abusive ones, who take advantage of the master's delay to eat, drink, and get drunk. The parable suggests an episode of the TV series "Undercover Boss," in which a CEO visits a part of the business as a newly hired employee.

Luke intends Jesus' exhortations to encourage his disciples. This section of his gospel aims to respond to Christians who are growing weary of waiting and beginning to cave in to immediate concerns.

The rich fool in last Sunday's gospel sees his biggest problem as lack of storage space for his harvest. His wealth becomes his source of whatever confidence he has in the world. The axiom, "Eat, drink, and be merry," allures him. Who needs to wait upon a future when there is so much to comfort us here?

Clearly Luke's audience is concerned about how they will provide for themselves for the long haul, about whether or not the claims of the Kingdom have precedence over day to day imperatives, and about what commitments are worthy of ultimate trust and value.

● **Where is your treasure and your heart?**



● **What in the way you live each day indicates where your heart is?**

● **What wisdom or wise people keep you from despair?**

The element of surprise pervades Jesus' discourse. Jesus counsels us to keep our lamps burning. The kingdom may startle us, erupting as suddenly as a thief breaking in. While the end times may be delayed, they are nonetheless rushing toward us.

The mention of a wedding feast has echoes of the Passover banquet. Images of dining at night while readied for flight recall the night of the exodus, Israel's defining event in which enslavement in Egypt gave way to liberation. So, too, will our crossing over into eternity be a moment of rescue.

The suddenness of Christ's return requires alertness on the part of all who wait, and a readiness for a new exodus without advance notice. Meanwhile, a critical facet of being ready involves the regular anticipating of the heavenly banquet through participating in the earthly one, the Eucharist. The marriage feast of the lamb may seem to delay, but we foretaste that sumptuous meal every time we gather around the altar.

Luke refuses to calculate when the Messiah will appear. We Christians cannot set an end-time clock and retire for the night. No, Jesus admonishes: Dress for hard work. Stay alert! Establish inexhaustible accounts in the heavens. This is a call to carry forth the signs of the messianic age in our own work. We must feed the hungry, heal the sick, and free the oppressed. We have the promise that the master who finds his work going on in his absence will upon his return put on an apron, seat us at table, and serve us.

● **What do you understand by "an hour you don't expect?"**

● **How does participating in Eucharist whet your appetite for the eternal banquet?**

DO SOMETHING



● Each year Bread for the World works with congregations to advocate to end hunger in the U.S. and the world. Join their Offering of Letters. Bread for the World provides easy, online ways to petition our president and write to Congress to end hunger. bread.org

What sure knowledge of God do we have?

In Sunday's first reading from the Wisdom of Solomon, a Greek-speaking Jew meditates on the exodus events, reimagining the story of the tenth plague in which the angel of death kills the Egyptian firstborn. This divine retribution against Israel's enemies, even to the extreme of God striking down the children of the Egyptians, may trouble modern readers.

More valuable for us today is the wisdom writer's stress on the slaves' sure knowledge of God's liberating care. In their circumstances of tremendous oppression, the Hebrew slaves turn to God as their hope. In these slaves who cry out to God for justice, the wisdom writer recognizes and imagines a community of faith and trust in God's promises.

However idealized this picture, it holds a kernel of truth: trust in God is not ordinarily a solitary affair. On

that night the men and women of Israel "covenanted with one accord," agreeing to share alike in the same benefits and the same dangers resulting from their common faith. Their willingness to take risks together and make commitments to one another came before the vindication they awaited from God.

Israel's ancestors trust God's promises.

On the night of the passover our ancestors were given warning beforehand, so that having sure knowledge, they might be heartened by the promises that they trusted.

Your people, O God, were looking for the salvation of the just and the destruction of their enemies; for by the same means you used to punish our enemies, you called us to yourself and made us glorious.

For in secret the devout children of good people were offering sacrifices and covenanted with one accord to keep the law of God.

Wisdom 18.6-9

● **In what relationships do you experience a sense of shared risk and shared commitment? How many of these relationships are public?**

PRAY

Pray together to conclude your reflection on the Sunday scriptures. Spend some time in quiet reflection. Which relationships do you feel called to attend to? To what action do you feel led? Bring your reflections to prayer.

LEADER: Loving God, help us to discern how our lives are woven together.

ALL: Give us courage to reach out to one another despite our fear.

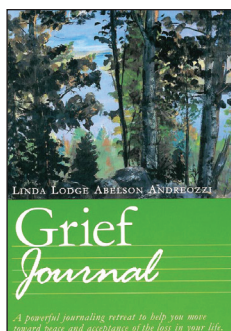
Voice your own petitions.

LEADER: God Spirit, knit our hearts and lives together in your love.

ALL: Inspire our hopes and imaginations; draw us always into your future for us. Amen.



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Before we can pray or forgive or even listen, we need to be at peace with ourselves. *Grief Journal* is one woman's story of coming through the loss of a young husband and miraculously finding herself. "I had a good marriage and a happy life," Linda Andreozzi writes. "We had fun. I also drank a lot, worked too much, watched TV every day, and had no spiritual life. The loss of everything I knew and held dear gave me two things that can never be taken from me: my sobriety and my companionship with God. I will never be alone in that same black hole where I whispered my first real prayer: 'Help!'"

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