

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2021

(Mark 13:1-8)

Waiting. Without question it is one of the most frustrating and agonizing things we'll experience in life.

Waiting begins at a young age, when hope is mixed with joy: waiting for a special birthday, or the arrival of the friend coming over for a play date, or the dawning of Christmas morning. We continue to wait throughout our lives, periods often tinged with anxiety: waiting for grades, college acceptance letters, job offers, a first paycheck, the last day of work before retirement, and milestone anniversaries. There is the joyful optimism of waiting for weddings and births. There are the stresses of waiting for medical appointments, test results, and treatment plans. There is the sorrow of waiting with a family member, friend or loved one as they journey through their final days in this life.

Some events for which we wait take place at dates and times known to us, the weddings, anniversaries and life milestones we can mark in advance on our calendars. Often though the things for which we wait have no date or time attached to them. There is no certainty about anything ... and the lack of certainty feeds into what becomes aggressive and perhaps even overwhelming fear and anxiety.

For Peter, James, John and Andrew, waiting for a time uncertain – in this instance, the destruction of the massive Temple before which they had just stood – wasn't something with which they were comfortable. They weren't happy with the blank they saw left to be filled in at the end of the sentence, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down ... *when?*" There's that question: *when?* *Jesus*, they're saying, *give us certainty. Tell us what date we can mark on our calendar.* I think though that in this moment the disciples are asking Jesus the wrong question. In response, he gives them the answer to the question they should have asked: *What do we do until then?*

In Act One of Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot," two friends – Vladimir and Estragon – meet at a tree where they have been instructed to wait for the arrival of the title character. They wait without having any idea when or even if Godot will show up. Vladimir, for instance, says, "He didn't say for sure he'd come." Estragon replies, "What if he doesn't come?" "We'll come back to-morrow," says Vladimir, to which Estragon says, "And then the day after to-morrow.... And so on."¹

¹ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," Act One. From *A Samuel Beckett Reader*, pp. 376-7.

Vladimir and Estragon didn't have any certain time for the arrival of Godot, but they don't simply sit and wait. *They do something*. They talk. They joke. They eat. They interact with the three other characters in the play as they appear. They weren't distracted by the absence of Godot, instead occupying their time while waiting for his arrival. In their way they were answering the question, *What do we do until then?*

I see something similar taking place in Mark. Jesus is telling his disciples that there will be signs and events that will take place. As we just heard, "[N]ation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines."² What Jesus doesn't want to happen I believe is for them to be distracted by these events – to overreact to them, in the words of Cynthia Rigby – and be led from the work they should be doing. In her commentary on this passage, Rigby refers to the theologian John Calvin “who opted not to write a commentary trying to elucidate the book of Revelation, because he did not want to waste energy that could be devoted to proclaiming the majesty of God on idle speculation.”³

What Jesus has shared with the disciples is imagery whose purpose, according to John Cole, “is to divert attention from the spectacular to the morning-by-morning faithfulness of a people caught between the ages.”⁴ Jesus did not want Peter, James, John and Andrew to be distracted from the work they should be doing – the kingdom building for which they should be striving – by the events taking place around them, or even events that haven't yet occurred. Recall the words of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”⁵

I think it's a safe bet that certainty is something for which we all strive. Without question I would like to be able to point to something and say unequivocally “It will happen then” or “It will happen there.” But for me – and indeed for all of us – that's not always possible ... and that's okay. The things for which we have a date and time should be marked down; for all others we should simply know that they are coming. What we shouldn't do is fret about them now and be distracted from the work we are already doing.

Many of you have heard me use the word “yet” as an add-on to certain comments. “The congregation isn't where it used to be ... *yet*.” “We don't have a large group of kids here ... *yet*.” “We're not able to welcome the community here the way we used to ... *yet*.” I have faith that that all of those things *will* happen and honestly don't concern myself with the *when*. Focusing on the *when* is the distraction; focusing on the *now* is what we should be about.

² Mark 13:8 (NRSV).

³ Cynthia L. Rigby, “Mark 13:1-8 – Theological Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* (Kindle edition).

⁴ John E. Cole, “Mark 13:1-8 – Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* (Kindle edition).

⁵ Matthew 6:34 (NRSV).

Let's continue doing the things we're doing, as well as we possibly can. Let's introduce new things, doing them as well as we possibly can. Let's continue welcoming old friends and first-time visitors and give them the sense of family this place provides, doing it as well as we possibly can. Let's focus – to use the language of Jesus in today's reading – on the earthquakes and famines in the lives of our neighbors, doing what we can to steady the ground beneath their feet and ease their hunger ... and doing it as well as we possibly can.

There is a time to wait, and a time to act. The things for which we wait will be here soon enough. The time to act – the time to build up our little corner of the kingdom – is now.

Amen.