

Sermon

As for me and my House, we shall Serve...

Pastor Lisa Giacomazza

Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Come Now Long Expected Jesus...a hymn we traditionally sing during Advent – the season of expectations of the arrival of Jesus the baby, born in Bethlehem. Today our scripture from Matthew tells us to be ready – ready to Jesus return. Jesus is preparing the disciples for His imminent departure, his death. Like the other Gospels, Matthew is clear that the timing of Christ's return is unknown. Jesus does speak of signs of the end times – something people reference today when clusters of natural disaster happen or other calamity, but the truth is we do not know.

On this Veteran's Day, my mind reflects upon the sacrifices and challenges that many of you have experienced either as a serviceman and woman or as a family member. Before the age of technology and perhaps even today, it is not always clear when leave or their return might occur. The needs of the position come first and there may not be a great deal of notice. During war, just knowing their whereabouts and "if" they will return is questionable given the dangers they face. Yet, as a family member you must remain in a state of readiness, able to receive your weary loved one whenever they may return.

Now in this case, we are likely talking weeks, months or maybe a year of wondering. I don't think any of the early Christians imagined Jesus' return would stretch into two millennia. So you can't really blame us if we don't seem to be "ready" in the true sense of the word.

Inspired by [workingpreacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org) commentary on Matthew 25:1-13 by Susan Hylen, Assoc. Professor, Emory University and commentary on Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 by Bryan J. Whitfield, Professor, Mercer University

But what if we change the word...rather than “ready” we change it to “awake”. Awake is to be conscious and aware of your surroundings. And what if we add the word Spirit or spiritual...spiritually awake – to have a breakthrough, enlightenment, a fresh recognition of God. Is this what Jesus was talking of? Perhaps...

Our scripture from Joshua calls the people to return to tradition, to their Temple but with a renewed covenant/relationship/commitment with the Lord again. He first reports God’s words, recounting all the Lord’s gracious deeds from the ancestral period to the escape from Egyptian oppression and the occupation of the land. Here, as throughout scripture, the covenant always rests on grace, on what God has already done.

This consciousness of spiritual awakesness – when we know we have choices, when we know we can be kind, do good, care about justice and unification – and we are capable to this through one thing – the loving grace of God. God always goes first. God promises to make a way where there seems to be no way. In Joshua’s time, the people immediately pledge to serve the Lord and affirm the central confession of the Great Commandment, the Shema, repeating “The Lord is our God”. In this chant, in this promise, they will join Joshua and his household and serve the Lord.

But Joshua does not accept this quick response. He needs a deeper commitment from them so they will sustain the faith. He knows they have been distracted and dissuaded by the Gods of Mesopotamia or Egypt. Perhaps today the Gods are more like substances, pod casters, the desire for wealth or beauty, perhaps even medical doctors prescribing all kinds of medications to make us

think and feel differently...the Gods of Egypt then and these Gods today that distract and detract appear to give us joy and power but in the end, they are projections of human ideals of beauty and strength.

How did you end up here? How and why are you here either in person or watching? Is it because of a family tradition of attending church and it's just what you've always done? Do you "dabble" in faith because it seems like the right thing to do?

Joshua challenges the people about this very thing – asking them to examine themselves. Introspective prayer and consciousness is powerful and transforming. To truly delve into where you are at this moment, as you believe to be. Hear Joshua as he begins to help the people re-commit to their faith...

"But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 20If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." 21And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!" 22Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." 23He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." 24The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey."

It is so easy to be pulled and distracted by philosophy that is not of God. Our Gospel from Matthew speaks of preparing as we touched upon. Having enough. But enough what? This seemed an illusive passage to me when I was young but on a day when I faced grief, on a day when I faced addiction, on a day

when I faced hate – I knew. I knew that I needed my “oil” to be able to feel the true grace and mercy of God.

The foolish said to the wise – give us some of your oil – and they replied, go get your own...and while they were doing so, they missed the bridegroom. Don’t be caught short. Don’t let your lamp burn out. It burns out when we fail to recognize how God is going before us, God is making a way, God is sending love to all creation.

We must make a choice, not once for all time, but again and again. Like the ancient Israelites, we need times and places that remind us of the gracious acts of God and call us back to awakeness. We need to take time and consciously renew our lives and our promise to love and serve the Lord.

Coming together like this is critically important to strengthen our minds and souls on what truly matters and to build our shield against what does not. We live into hope – a hope that God, through us, will establish justice and love over all and peace.

Yet in my house (family) and maybe yours too, that may not be the case. We are 2,000 years away from when Jesus last walked this earth. The stories we tell are ones from a time we cannot imagine. There is only one way for those who are not part of a religious teaching to know God’s mercy and love – and that is through us. Breaking down demons isn’t an easy job and it can take a toll on us. Sharing love in the face of anger, addiction, hate, confusion – it can be truly exhausting. I’ve had the fact that I’m a preacher thrown in my face more times than I wish to recall- trying to knock me off of my beliefs – and it would be easy to believe them – those voices of desperation to hold onto what they thought was

true for them, but I have too much oil in my lamp. It takes a good deal of oil to endure these moments – but I'm here today to be replenished, to remember, to recall, to rejoice. And then when we think, it didn't work – they didn't see – they do. Because before me came the grace of God.

Prior to sporting events there often are cheerleaders who get the crowd excited for the game – to get the athletes adrenaline going to endure their feat placed in front of them. And often there are chants that the crowd yell together – so I thought we could try that here today.

So what do you say? Are you ready? Are you awake? Then stand if you can and say these words with me....

- **I believe God can when I can't**
- **I believe God will restore peace to our world**
- **I believe God is love**
- **I believe I am love**
- **And as for me and my house- we shall serve the Lord!**

AMEN