

## What Are We Waiting For?

Luke 21:25-36, Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10

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In Freeport, Maine, during the summer of 1918, a group of boys were playing baseball. That afternoon a long fly ball made it all the way to the railroad tracks in the outfield. As it happened, a train was passing by at that very moment, a train with a Pullman sleeping car attached to the end of it. The ball sailed right into the outstretched hand of the Pullman porter standing in the open door of the railroad car. He caught it more as a reflex than as a planned action. The porter waved at the boys as the train sped away, taking with it the only baseball the boys owned. Their game was over for the day. After the shock and surprise wore off, the boys were mad. They wrote a letter to the Maine Central railroad company explaining their situation and asking to have their ball returned or replaced. Then they put their coins together and went to the local department store to buy a new baseball. The small store was named L.L. and G.C. Bean, later to be known simply as L.L. Bean. Then the boys went on with their regular activity of playing baseball, almost forgetting about the train incident.

Two weeks later, as the train came through Freeport, the same Pullman porter was standing on the steps of the Pullman sleeper. He waved once again to the boys. This time, instead of catching a baseball, he threw a baseball to the boys. The boys went over and picked up the baseball. As they gathered around the ball, they noticed writing on it. The ball was covered with the autographs of the starting lineup for the Boston Red Sox, including the signature of Babe Ruth. Throughout that summer, the porter tossed a ball to the boys in the baseball field whenever he came through town on the train. Some of the baseballs were covered with signatures. Others were ordinary baseballs to be used by the boys to play the game they loved so much. (from *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* by Larry Tye, 2004, page 169.)

What started out as an annoyance, became a series of wonderful surprises for those boys of Freeport. The boys on that baseball field in that seemingly insignificant town could not have imagined what lay ahead for them the day their baseball sailed into the railroad car. Their story has something to teach us on this First Sunday of Advent.

Today we begin our journey toward the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. We begin that journey, not by looking back into the past, but by looking forward into the future. The first Sunday in Advent traditionally focuses on the Second Coming of Christ, a time when Christ will return and bring the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. This will be a time when God's victory over the powers of death and evil will be complete.

Today's message will focus on Luke 21:34 – “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly like a trap.” (NRSV) Luke teaches us to be alert and to be on guard, ready for

what God is doing and what God will do. Luke tells us that we are waiting for something wonderful to happen.

For the boys on that Freeport baseball diamond something wonderful was about to happen. Something was coming that was greater than they were able to imagine. All they wanted was one baseball. They received a box full of baseballs, many of them covered in signatures that made them treasured gifts.

The return of Christ and the fulfillment of God's kingdom will bring something we can barely comprehend – God's complete victory over the powers of evil and death. Like those boys who soon put the event of the missing baseball out of their minds, we often go about our daily lives as if this everyday world is all there is. We place our hope in our efforts to make the world a better place. But our real hope is based not on our efforts, but in the work of God that will be fulfilled at Christ's return. In Luke 21, the return of Christ is described in verse 27 as "the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." The return of Christ is an important part of our Christian hope. In Titus 2:13 Paul says that we "wait for the blessed hope and manifestation of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Our blessed hope is the return of Christ and the fulfillment of God's kingdom. This fulfillment will bring events and blessings that are beyond our comprehension, gifts we can only begin to imagine.

We are to be on guard and alert. Being alert means two things – having a tenacious hope and continuing in faithful service. We wait with hope, a hope based on the fulfillment of God's kingdom.

Jeremiah was a man of tenacious hope. Jeremiah 33:14 speaks of a time when God's promise will be fulfilled. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Jeremiah proclaimed that God's salvation was coming.

Jeremiah was a man of tenacious hope. He was in prison because the leaders did not want him spreading his message of doom and judgment. (This message of doom and gloom was considered harmful to the morale of the people.) The Babylonian army was surrounding Jerusalem. The outlook for Jeremiah and for Jerusalem was bleak. Yet Jeremiah proclaimed a word of hope. He even emphasized this hope through a prophetic action. In chapter 32 he purchased a field. Who thinks it is a good investment to buy a field right before it will be overrun by a foreign army is a good investment? Jeremiah proclaimed that pain, destruction, hardship and death did not have the final word. God's salvation will have the final word. Jeremiah was a man of tenacious hope.

We, as believers in Jesus Christ, are also to be people of tenacious hope. We trust there is more to God's plan than we can see. Hardship and pain are not the final words. Our hope is in what God is doing and even more in what God will do.

We wait with tenacious hope for something wonderful that is going to happen – the fulfillment of God's kingdom.

While we wait we are to be on guard, watchful. Luke 21:34 says, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly like a trap.”

While we wait we continue in faithful service. We do not sit back in our recliner chairs and wait for God to end all suffering. We do not ignore the suffering and flee from it through drunkenness, dissipation and other forms of escape (relentless pursuit of possessions, endless entertainment, etc.). We seek not to let the worry and anxiety of life get the upper hand, but keep our hope fixed on what God is doing and what God will do.

We wait in faithful service. We care for the needy. We work for peace. We preach the gospel. We reach out to the homeless and the sick and those who are hurting and those who are in prison. We care for our families. We participate in the life of our communities to bring help where we can. We do this together as a congregation and as part of the larger Church. We encourage each other in this faithful service when we are weary of the struggle as well as when we see progress.

Yet, while we work and while we wait, we keep our eyes lifted up. We keep our souls lifted up. We keep our eyes and our souls lifted up toward the heavens, toward God, because that is where our ultimate hope lies – in God’s salvation. “To you, O Lord, my soul is lifted; for you I wait all day long.” We look at the needs right before us and continue our faithful service to Jesus Christ. But our gaze is not only on what is right in front of us. Our gaze is upwards, toward the Lord and toward what is to come.

Advent begins with a longing for God’s kingdom. We not only look back at what God has done, we also look ahead toward what is to come. Therefore, we begin our Advent devotions based on Christmas carols with the song, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
 And ransom captive Israel,  
 That mourns in lonely exile here  
 Until the Son of God appear.  
 Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
 Shall come to thee, O Israel!

This song captures the longing of those who look for God’s salvation. Though rooted in the longing of the prophets for the coming of the Messiah, it also speaks of the longing we have for the return of Christ and the fulfillment of God’s kingdom. Christ is Emmanuel, God with us, now and forever. We live in the in-between time, the time between the coming of Christ at Bethlehem and the return of Christ that will bring the fulfillment of God’s kingdom. Christ has come. Christ will come again. I encourage you to make the words to this song a part of your table grace and devotional life this coming week.

There is one very important difference between our situation and that of the boys of the Freeport baseball diamond. They did not know the people who would help them or those to

whom they sent their letter. They did not know the Pullman porter. They did not know the president of the Maine Central railroad company.

We do know the one who is our help. We know the Lord Jesus Christ when we place our faith in him, receiving forgiveness and a new life in Christ. Christ has given us salvation and Christ will complete that salvation. Christ has come. Christ will come again.

If you do not know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I encourage you to ask Christ into your life and receive the forgiveness of sin and newness of life that he offers.

Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank you that you sent Jesus Christ to be our Savior. Help us to be people of hope and people of faithful service. Amen.