

“While We Wait, We Work”

Imagine with me for a moment. This year is 1844, The United States is still a relatively new country. It is seventeen years before the start of the Civil War. The year is 1844. The crisp air of autumn signals the change of seasons coming soon. But you and your friends are certain of a different “coming” this autumn day. Standing in a field in upstate New York along with hundreds of other worshippers, you wait for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Some have hands raised to the sky in praise; others softly singing hymns. You are convinced Jesus is coming back—today! At any minute, the trumpet will sound and Christ will appear. You and all the faithful will be taken with him. Your pastor, the Baptist layman William Miller, has studiously examined the scriptures for decades and pinpointed today’s date, October 22, 1844, as the day of Jesus’ triumphant return. Ironically, he calls it *The Advent*.

Miller put together this extensive timeline of biblical history through Genesis through Revelation, with special attention paid to the apocalyptic visions of Daniel 8 and a specific interpretation of parables in Matthew’s gospel. On October 22, 1844, tens of thousands of “Millerites” across the United States, Canada, and England are awaiting this very day. The fact that you have sold all your possessions and given all your money away doesn’t faze you in the least,

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since you will soon be with Jesus. You haven't even eaten today because, well, why do you need to?

But as the hours of the day go by, October 22 ends like any other day.

“Okay,” you say to yourself, “Maybe it will be tomorrow.” But that day also comes and goes without Christ's return. Finally, emotionally drained from the experience and weak from no food for two days, you are assisted into your rented room where you collapse and sleep for two days, “without pain, but sick with disappointment.”

William Miller's very narrow level lens of interpretation left many people waiting for sure, but this is not the kind of waiting we are called to do in the Advent season. We could poke fun at the Millerites but the return of Christ has occupied a lot of bandwidth in the Christian conscience. There have been nine major predictions of the return of Christ since 2000 alone. All experienced the same hefty disappointment felt by the Millerites years ago. The series of *Left Behind* books has popularized the end times in American culture and caused many to be misplaced and misled in attempting to decide when Jesus will return. In recent years, there have even been false prophets who have gained thousands of converts who believe that the State of Israel can be influenced by human efforts which in turn will bring about the second coming of Jesus.

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With similar conviction, the words of the prophet Isaiah capture the dizzying praise of God's mighty deeds and the impatient yearning of God's people for God's return. We read in Isaiah 64, "*O That you would tear open the heavens and come down... (v.1). Yes, come Lord! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect.... From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.*" (v.4). With Isaiah, we are right to praise God for God's work in our midst, throughout all time and space! Notice the word at the end, though, "*Wait, ...no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.*" Focus on that word again: *Wait.*

The ecstatic vision of Isaiah continues to lift high the only God whose works are worthy of such adoration. With fervor, we want God to come with immediacy. And so we wait. And, in our waiting we prepare through cycle after cycle of repentance and praise. Isaiah 64 is a beautiful liturgy of the yearnings of God's people tempered with the praise of God's glory. We are called to wait. But how? Will we be found praising God and declaring the extraordinary deeds of God?

When I think of the wonder of God, I harken back to a trip I took to Yellowstone Park in the spring of 2013. I, along with fourteen other seminarians and one of our professors, spend 10 days at a Methodist camp near Yellowstone.

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We studied the meaning of the sabbath and also the meaning of God's creation. We took several trips into Yellowstone Park. In this week's edition of *Christian Century* magazine, Rev. Julia Seymour, pastor of Big Timber Lutheran Church in Montana, relates her personal observations of the park. I share them with you because they are very similar to my experience. The park is beautiful with its lodgepole pines, grunting bison, wide grasslands, and swift rivers. One also sees plenty of elk and antelopes. The Montana sky is endless---one can literally see a rainstorm coming two hours away. Like God, Old faithful geyser is faithful. It erupts about each 48 minutes in fabulous glory. The park offers consolation by offering reminders of the strength of the earth and the almost everlasting nature of season cycles and life and death. We wait as we enjoy God's splendor.

The message to wait continues into the New Testament words of Mark with the added urgency of preparation. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 13:20 and it sounds like many of the Old Testament prophecies in Ezekiel, Joel and Amos. This is the first Sunday of Advent, but Jesus's words sound more like the solemnity of Ash Wednesday. The promise is that Jesus will collect the faithful no matter where they are. The parable of the fig tree illustrates the quoted prophecy. There will be obvious signs that will show that the season of the Messiah's returning is close. You know the metaphor well. We see the change of seasons all around us. That crisp fall day in 1844, was full of the signs of the season soon to give way to the

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stark austerity of winter. These signs are like the blooming of trees in the spring.

Jesus says. So we wait. We prepare and wait.

But there is a warning. Do not fall asleep while doing all this waiting. Do not become complacent with the beauty of God's earth. Stay awake! Especially important is the declaration, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" (v.32). This is the key verse. Like the master who leaves the servants in his stead with work to do while he is absent, so we, the church, have been left with much work to do. We work because the master told us what to do when he was with us and also because we know he is returning and we want to be found faithful. But we do not know the exact time of his return.

And the work we have been given is due to God's divine plan, which we do not always know in advance. God's plan may ultimately seem strange.

Yellowstone also contains strange things. It is full of odd things such as spitting mud pots, mineralized hillsides, unexpected tremors and unpredictable spouts of hot water with steam coming up. Yellowstone actually sits on an active volcano. Although Yellowstone gives us scenery that takes one's breath away, it is unpredictable as well. Old Faithful might be predictable, but other geysers in the park just randomly spit out steam. The volcano could go off at any time.

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As we do God's work, we have to rely on God's will. In 1995 gray wolves were introduced back into Yellowstone. Many opposed this move, especially local cattle farmers who worried the wolves would destroy their herds. But the introduction has recreated the ecological balance needed in the ecosystem of the park. Prior to the wolves coming back, there were too many elk in the park. The elk were eating up too much foliage and there was too much flooding. With the wolves in the park, the elk population has gone down and the erosion has been reduced. The natural system created by God before man initially killed off the wolves is working again now that humans have acted to reintroduce the wolf.

We work while we wait on Jesus to return. This, friends, is the lesson of the Advent season in which we find ourselves. We are in between Christ's comings. We celebrate the first coming of Christ amongst us as a child also anticipating Christ's return as Lord! Advent, then, is very much an in-between time---a bridge between the realities of two kingdoms! Advent is anxiously awkward; our waiting, then, cannot be static. The warning here is that our waiting must be a time of active preparation.

When exactly Christ returns simply does not matter because there is work to be completed. There are hungry and poor people---widows, orphans, single mothers, unemployed. There are injustices to be called out and righted. There is

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Good News to share with a world that, like the Millerites, is fervent in its activity and often misguided in its energy. We are grounded by the promise of Christ to return, and we are encouraged by the signs of the season we are in. But we must wait. And we must work. While we wait, we work.

Mark's words call us all us all to be Advent geysers in the world. We have been given work that is not ours to put down. We cannot turn off the love that is under and around us, the power and pressure of God's own caldera, God's own underlying volcano of power. Instead, we let that wildness pour out of us in our daily work and in the occasional eruptions that are necessary in this world as it is.

In closing, we take this metaphor from God's wonderful creation in Yellowstone Park. From a geyser, let us learn our lesson. Its waters churn and change the landscape around it. Its steam makes life possible that cannot exist elsewhere and also prevents the growth of other things. When we see these things taking place, we remember that our Advent lives are contained in God's wildness--past, present and future. At the edge of the geyser, as in Advent, comfort and warning go hand in hand.

Credit is given to Rev. Brian Arant for use of excerpts from his sermon outline and sermon for this week's sermon.