

November 28, 2021 | Journey Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 21:25–36](#)

TITLE: Waiting Toward Hope

By Kathryn Ophardt

Esperar. “*Esperar*” is the Spanish word meaning “to wait” or “to hope.” In Spanish, it is the same verb, the same action. But I can say for me that my waiting and my hoping often look different from one another. When I wait, I’m often checking the clock, looking around in all directions, a little irritated that whatever I’m waiting for is not quite as punctual as me. However, when I hope, I often take a deep breath and imagine the thing, person, or world that I long for. For me, waiting feels restless, while hoping seems to wrap me in a blanket of stillness that comforts me with the sheer anticipation of the good that might come.

Before I came to Pittsburgh, I worked in a refugee resettlement organization where I often passed to the waiting room to welcome people seeking asylum into our office. Spanish is not my native language, so I translated “waiting room” with my best guess. I called it the “sala de esperanza.” I called it that for months before another employee heard me and laughed. She corrected me and said it was called the “sala de espera” not “esperanza.” You see, while the verb *esperar* means both “to wait” or “to hope,” the noun forms take on more specific meanings. My coworker explained that waiting room is “sala de espera,” and I realized that all that time I was calling it the “hoping room”—*la sala de esperanza*. After a moment of pondering together, we agreed that perhaps in this context, where travelers from all of the world sought refuge in Mexico City and aid from our office, that perhaps the “hoping room” might be more accurate to what was taking place on the other side of the reception desk.

This question of, “are we waiting?” or “are we hoping?” is at the core of our Gospel reading today. At this point in the story, Jesus is teaching in the Temple and telling the people about the end times. Jesus describes distress between nations, restlessness of the sea, and finally describes “the Son of Man coming in a cloud.” While Jesus acknowledges that many people will be overcome with fear, Jesus calls his listeners to respond in steadfastness—he says, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

To illustrate the coming of the end times, Jesus tells a parable of the fig tree. Jesus explains that anticipating the end times is as natural as watching the seasons change through the leaves of a fig tree. Jesus says, “as soon as the fig tree sprouts leaves you can see for yourself and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” This is such an interesting statement. We have heard these kinds of words before. They remind me of Isaiah 37 that proclaims that God reigns over all the kingdoms on earth because God is the creator of heaven and earth! They remind me of Psalm 45 that promises that God’s reign will never end. They remind me of John the Baptist

prophesying the coming of Jesus saying, "The Kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the Gospel!" The idea that God reigns in the world is a common theme throughout the Bible. But it always seemed to me that God's reign was already here, through creation, through Jesus, through the Church. I still believe all this to be true. I believe that we can participate in God's reign in our communities even now as we love and serve one another. I believe that each time we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, one earth as it is in heaven," that we are praying for God's reign in our lives now. However, there is something different about Jesus' words in this passage. They lift our eyes to the heavens and prophesy of the life to come.

In short, Jesus is describing the end times. He is describing the coming of the new creation. When we think of the end times, people often think that it is the end. Rather, I believe that Jesus tells of the completion or fulfillment of God's reign. I believe that God's kingdom has always been part of this world, but that we knew God's reign in a new way through the incarnate Christ, and that we will know God's reign in an even fuller way in the new creation.

The signs Jesus mentions are vague. At the beginning of the passage we read today, he says, "There will be signs in the sun, and moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves." This tells us very little. Jesus doesn't tell us what exactly to look for, and if we go off of nations being confused or distressed, well I think it is safe to say that the world has long since arrived. I am not going to try to interpret these signs. In fact, what I hear Jesus saying is to not be distracted by the chaos of our world, but to look to heaven and wait on God. Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." Jesus knows the reality of human life. Jesus knows that it is scary and overwhelming and hard.

It can be hard to hope for the end of the pandemic while it seems endless. It can be hard to hope that there will be peace on earth when there is violence seems so pervasive. It can be hard to hope that true equity is possible when racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia are the plague of prejudice in our own lives or in the lives of those we love. It can be hard to hope in a hospital room. It can be hard to hope when you are stranded on the side of the road whether literally or metaphorically. This is the weight of the worries of this life that Jesus is talking about. Jesus knows that we are so often waiting for the other shoe to drop. Jesus knows that it is hard to wait toward hope.

Jesus says something else that is curious to me. He says that all these things that he has prophesied, will take place before that generation passes away. Well, it seems that Jesus was not talking about the literal generation of the people he was addressing. What if Jesus was inviting us to identify with all of humanity as one generation of siblings? This is what I was wondering, and Justo Gonzalez, Bible

Commentator and Liberation Theologian, happens to agree. Justo Gonzalez even takes it a step further and offers the interpretation that Jesus is calling us to solidarity with all of humanity—that our waiting for Christ to come again unites us with generations past, present, and future! God lived a human life through Jesus Christ to be in solidarity with us. Christ came from the heavens to the manger to be with us. May we also live in solidarity with one another. Justo Gonzalez offers that as Christians, we can lift up the heads of our siblings to behold the coming of the Son of Man, not in fear, but in hope, so that we can hope together! We can hope together in the liminality of the already and the not yet. During the Season of Advent, we look back at the manger in rest in the truth that God is already with us. And during Advent, we look to the future, and we wait, and we hope that one day, God's reign would be brought to completion and all of creation would be reconciled to God.

The world is one giant, chaotic waiting room. So the question is: are you waiting there? Or are you hoping there? When God is your refuge, waiting and hoping look remarkably similar. So may we hope together as one people before God.

All glory be to God. Amen.