In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

My text this morning is from our First Lesson, from Numbers Chapter 21. As I read my verse, please notice the reference to “impatience.” The verse goes this way:

From Mount Hor they [the Israelites] set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient on the way. (Numbers 21:4, RSV)

This is one of those sermons that I am delighted to prepare. It is a sermon in response to a request from one of our members that someday, when the Bible texts seem right, I should preach a sermon on “waiting.” I believe that this morning’s story about the Israelites and how impatient they became on their way to the Promised Land gives me a good occasion for speaking of waiting. Let us see, then, what we can learn about watching and waiting from this story in our First Lesson, together with today’s theme of the Holy Cross of Christ.

So, the Israelites became impatient on their way to the Promised Land. They had escaped their cruel bondage in slavery in Egypt. They had escaped thanks to the miracles and wonders of our God. They had survived in the wilderness many a year. They had a right to think they were making progress toward the Promised Land, but now they must endure a delay. They must suffer a detour. The king of Edom has forbidden the travelers to pass through his territory by way of the main road, called the King’s Highway (Num. 20:14-18).¹ This means that the Israelites are forced into the desert, and they hate the desert! The desert is a place of danger and loneliness. One Bible scholar puts it this way:

The desert is traditionally a place of danger in the Old Testament, inhabited by scorpions and vipers and “flying serpents” (Isa. 30:6), a “land of deserts and pits,” of

“drought and deep darkness” that “none passes through and where no man dwells” (Jer. 2:6).

In our text, then, the Israelites find themselves in the forlorn desert, and they become impatient. Nothing seems good to them, not even the manna, the bread from heaven, the Lord provides for them. They are a restless crowd, an inpatient people.

Such a thing is possible for us. Sometimes life so works itself out that we are left waiting. We hope for something or we dread something, but in any case, something lies ahead of us. It is a big deal, perhaps even life-changing for us. It is a big deal, but it is not yet here. We must wait for it. We are stuck in the middle between all that lies behind us and that for which we hope or fear. We are stuck in the middle, I say, and we are waiting.

Waiting, then, takes these two forms: we can wait with joy, as we might await our wedding day or the birth of a child or a new job that seems perfect for us. Or we can wait with fear or sorrow, as we wait, for example, for news about a loved one near the end of life. Let that, then, provide the structure for this sermon: waiting for good, and then, waiting for bad.

First, let’s consider the human experience of waiting for something good.

Recently, a friend down in Dallas, Texas sent me a link to a video performance of the hymn “How Great Thou Art.” The song was sung by Carrie Underwood and Vince Gill. I do not know much about either singer, but I do know the hymn. I bet you do too. In fact we are set to sing that hymn during the Communion this morning. The caption to the video says that you know you have done well in a song when you receive a standing ovation before the song is even done. And that was so in this video. The crowd was standing, clapping, crying before the song was even done, and I was crying along with them. It is that last verse that was so tugging on my heart. I am so very sad at the recent death of my great teacher and friend theologian Robert W. Jenson. But the last verse of the hymn raises the heart and lets you look forward to better times:

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation, and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart! Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, “My God, how great thou art!”

Perhaps it is a corny thing to say, but I sometimes wonder how people make it in life without hope of the resurrection, without hope of heaven, without hope

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3 https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/JRoss%40thompsoncoe.com/15e6faeb7885e8f4
of seeing Jesus face to face and seeing our loved ones again. I certainly look forward in hope to the resurrection of the dead through Jesus Christ and the great communion of saints.

I wait for that. I am not there yet. None of us is. We are all waiting and watching for Jesus Christ and his kingdom. So, that is waiting on a large scale. Waiting for something good.

And we can wait with joy for smaller matters — small in the whole scheme of things, but important to us nonetheless. At our recent NALC Convocation, for example, I spoke with a friend who suffered a stroke about the same time I fell backwards down those hard steps and injured myself. Both he and I are making good progress, but we are not there yet. I pointed out to my friend that a year from now, we could be better and back to normal. The problem is that we cannot magically jump ahead a year. We must live through each day, one at a time, before we get to where we will be a year from now. So we are waiting — waiting for a small matter in the universe, but waiting for something that is important to us.

So we can wait for big things and for little things. A people can wait through the centuries for justice and dignity. An impoverished land can wait for medicine and water wells and some compassion in this world. A farmer can wait for the harvest, the student can wait to hear about his or her college application. A wronged person can wait for vindication. A hopeful person can wait to find and marry a godly wife or a godly husband. Children can wait for Christmas. Indeed we can all wait for Christmas!

How shall we wait? What can people of faith learn about waiting from this morning’s story of the Israelites in the wilderness?

It seems to me that what ailed the Israelites could be called a Trinitarian failure of memory. They had forgotten things. They had forgotten the blessings of their past, their present, and their future.

First, they had forgotten about their past. Even so fundamental a matter as their very life and existence: they had forgotten that God had created them and sustained them to that very moment. They had overlooked that they had breath in their lungs and hearts that were still beating. They had lost sight of all the Lord had done for them heretofore. Could they have forgotten the Exodus? Could they have forgotten the walls of water piling up on either side of them, so that they walked dry shod through the midst of the sea? Had they forgotten what a small, ill-equipped people they were compared to Pharaoh and all his armies and all his chariots? Had they forgotten their survival in the wilderness? Had they forgotten that they were not a leaderless people, but had magnificent Moses to help them along? Altogether, in their impatience, they had lost sight of what God had done for them so far and could be expected to do for them going forward.

It is a human sort of thing — this forgetting. There have been a few times for Carol and me when money was tight, or at least it sure felt that way to us.
And in those situations, I have been the worried one. I have been the one who was anxious about how we were going to keep our little financial ship afloat. I worried about bills, I worried about the cost of college, I worried about many things. But Carol was always the one who would remind me that the Lord had seen us through tough times in the past, and that he would provide going forward. And so it has been. It is easy to lose track of God’s blessings in our life. When we do, then we become impatient and ungrateful and the waiting becomes hard.

Second, the Israelites in this morning’s story have overlooked God’s goodness in their lives even now, in their present. No hurricane is drowning them or flooding their possessions. No tornado is tearing things apart. No enemy army fills the horizon. And they have the present sign of God’s love for them in the form of the manna from heaven. They are recipients of marvels. They have not starved or died of thirst, and they have reason to understand that these marvels come from the hand of God. In their impatience, they have overlooked God’s present goodness to them.

You and I and all the many, many people of the church are like the Israelites of old. We are on a journey from here to there. In our baptisms, we were rescued from life in a world without Christ. In the waters of our baptism, as in the waters of the Red Sea at the time of the Exodus, we were brought forth and delivered into the arms of the living Jesus. He has walked with us since then, even now, and will continue so all the way into his kingdom. He nourishes us now with our own manna – the Eucharistic bread that assures us, one by one, of the forgiveness of our sins and therefore life everlasting. Let us not be so impatient for the good things ahead of us that we become unmindful and ungrateful for God’s present good work in our lives.

And third, in their murmurings and their impatience, the Israelites in this morning’s story seem to have forgotten that they are heading somewhere good. Have they forgotten or perhaps come to disbelieve in the Promised Land? Have they become so preoccupied with their present complaints that they have lost sight of the fact that these present miseries are but for a season and that they shall surely give way to a good future? If they were alone in the universe, and did not have the Lord to guide them, perhaps it would be rational for them to be preoccupied with their present complaints. But they are not alone. They are on their way! A land flowing with milk and honey awaits them. They have a good destination right up ahead of them. The Promised Land shall surely come, if they do not turn away from their God. However parched or boring their present reality might be, they still have reason to give thanks to God for his trustworthy labors to give them a home, a good home, someday.

Likewise with us. We might be watching and waiting for something good. We might be waiting for a new job, for the love of our life, for a new baby, for all kinds of good things. But let us not overlook that if we belong to Christ,
then we are also permitted to look forward to that Savior and to that good kingdom in which every good on our hearts will be safely in the hands of our God. Fight against letting present hopes and dreams obscure for us that we are hoping for heaven and we have reason to firmly expect it, because Jesus is good and we belong to him.

So, most of this sermon has been discussing the human experience of waiting for something good. My theme has been that we should not permit such waiting to cause us to overlook our God’s goodness in our past, in our present, and in our future.

Now let us head toward the end of this sermon by thinking about that other kind of waiting—that miserable kind of waiting: waiting with fear for that which we dread. We sense it, we anticipate it, the ax is about to fall. Perhaps our past is catching up with us. Perhaps the law is catching up with us. We can feel the sheriff breathing down our neck, we have heard rumors of the inspectors and auditors at work. Or the bad news of which the doctor spoke is drawing near. Perhaps we simply feel it in our bones or in the declining strength in our muscles that we are getting older and weaker and time is running out. We are caught in the middle. Perhaps we have some good memories of our past, but here we are, waiting for that which we fear.

If such a fearful season of waiting should be upon us now or upon us some time in the future, let us remember our great gospel text for this Sunday, for it trumps and completely overwhelms all other fears this old world can hold. Let us measure in one hand our present anxieties, and measure in the other hand the much greater weight of our gospel promise:

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16, RSV)

“For God so loved the world...” Are you in the world? Indeed you are! And so you are beloved of our God. You are so beloved that God the Father sent his Son that you should not die. It would take a mighty love, an almost inconceivable love, for me to send either of my sons to die in your place. But the true God of all the world sent his Son to die on a cross that you and I might live. Compared to that, all of which we might be in dread in this present season is going to give way to great joy in God’s kingdom.

A couple Sundays back, Jesus spoke to his disciples of a cross:

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24, RSV)
Sometimes, my friends, the taking up of Christ’s cross includes the taking of a season of waiting. We are not yet where we want to be. We are tempted to be impatient and ungrateful. But let us remember the great promise that Jesus gives soon after his words about the cross:

25For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:25, RSV)

When the waiting is hard, then, let us try to lose our lives in him, in Christ. Let us offer up our hopes and dreams, fears and disappointments, to him. Let us surrender our all – entire surrender to Jesus Christ, who will not fail us, who has proved his love by bearing the blessed cross, and who will bring a great harvest from our waiting. Let us lose ourselves in God. Let our souls sing, “How Great Thou Art,” and let us look forward to everlasting life with Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever, Amen.