

Waiting for the kingdom: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; Romans 8:12-25

by [Margaret B. Guenther](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

When I sit with the *Washington Post* and my morning coffee, I have a sense that I'm hovering on a threshold; like many Americans, I remember September 11 and feel as if I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. It often seems as if ours is the most anxious time in history, at least from our selfish perspective in a remarkably affluent and outwardly secure corner of God's world. We Americans have been shaken. We live with heightened awareness of the unease, the shakiness and uncertainty, the sense of foreboding that is part of the human condition.

We're not alone in this, however. There is a universality in Paul's depiction of an anxious time of suffering. All creation, he tells us, is poised: waiting for fulfillment, waiting with eager longing for something. There is the same universality in the story Jesus tells: the field is almost ready for the harvest, but it's far from perfect. What should be a bountiful crop of wheat is going to be half weeds. But until that harvest, when there will be a drastic sorting out, weeds and wheat must be left to grow. If the wheat—a universal symbol of nourishment—flourishes, so too do the useless, choking weeds. We wait for the time of decision, the irrevocable sorting out that comes at the end.

The juxtaposition of this Gospel text and a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that we aren't there yet. Both passages suggest that this is a time of waiting, of letting things grow and unfold. But it's also a time of looking forward to some sort of resolution, an end time. We live in the "not yet." We are poised on the threshold.

So what else is new? We wait edgily, not for an al-Qaeda strike or other random, terrifying destruction, but, in Paul's words, "to obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." To use the imagery employed by Jesus in his parable, we await the coming of God's kingdom. In different ways, Jesus and Paul are heralding the inbreaking of God's rule on earth, the fulfillment of all our hopes and prayers when we pray—alas, sometimes mindlessly—that God's kingdom come on earth and God's will be done on earth (in Washington, D.C., Afghanistan and Iraq, in affluent suburbs and in blighted inner cities).

We wait. If we knew precisely how and when the waiting would end, then our life in Christ would be simply an exercise in pious persistence. It would be like waiting at the airport until our flight is announced, or standing in line at the supermarket checkout. The tension in this kind of waiting is more tedium than anxiety.

Waiting for the inbreaking of the kingdom, however, is like no other kind of waiting. It is not the routine, humdrum marking of time in our daily lives, or the terror and dread of devastation. It is waiting in hope for something that is not seen, yet yearning for it with a longing that is beyond words. This yearning for the coming of the kingdom is yearning for God.

Both Jesus and Paul use powerful images of growth and fruition. Paul, who surely had little if any firsthand experience with the wondrous process of human birth, tells us that all of creation—which means all of humankind, all of us—is groaning in the pangs of childbirth. Just as the field of wheat with its intermingled weeds grows at its own pace, so birth cannot be hurried. Birth happens when it happens.

But what about those noxious weeds? What about the judgment Jesus makes so very clear in this parable? I'm in no hurry for that final day—I'm happy to muddle on for a bit, living into the promise of things hoped for but not seen. Just having the promise is enough for now. But lately I find myself thinking quite a bit about the weeds and wondering whether they have anything to do with me. I try to persuade myself that Jesus is talking about someone else, someone unworthy of saving, all those people who surely have no place in God's kingdom. Surely he's talking about those weedy people whom I would consign to the compost heap if not to the cleansing fire. It's much more comforting to hope that I am pure wheat and that the weeds are quite disposable.

But perhaps the concept of weeds is more complicated than I thought. In my honest moments, I fear that I am not pure wheat, but that I have some qualities of the weeds in me, qualities that I need to be free of before I can be truly fruitful. Or maybe I fail to grow and thrive because—fine-quality durum wheat that I am—I let myself be choked and thwarted by the weeds around me.

I bounce back and forth between these two pictures. On the one hand, the people of God are filled with the yearning for God; on the other, they are part of God's garden, active and growing toward the ultimate harvest. Both images remind us that we are living in a not-yet time, that we live in radical trust that God's promise will be fulfilled. We wait. We labor. We hope for that which is not seen, but somehow

knowing that what Paul calls our glorious liberty as children of God is all that truly matters.