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A Frenchman, a Japanese and an American faced the firing squad. Each was granted one last request. The Frenchman asked to hear "The Marseillaise," his national anthem. The Japanese asked to give one more lecture on the art of production schedules. The American requested, "Shoot me first--I can't stand one more lecture on Japanese production schedules." This sermon is for those who hate schedules. Most of us live our lives according to schedules. From the scheduled time we get up in the morning until we go to bed at night, we live according to schedules. Time management experts even teach us how to organize our desk work, so we schedule our work from the highest priority to lowest priority, making our effort more productive.

A case can be made for schedules. The most successful entrepreneurs and managers have learned how to schedule their time, energy and resources so as to be more effective. But those who are successful in their work are not necessarily successful in their living. Schedules may make one more effective, but schedules may also produce stress, heart trouble, divorces, and unhappy, unsuccessful children. Those of us who are white Americans have difficulty understanding and appreciating those cultures which have a more relaxed approach to schedules, but those cultures are often more successful in marriage and health.

One result of our dedication to schedules is the frustration caused when the schedule is not met. Look how agitated people get when their scheduled air flight is delayed. When I make the attempt to get to a meeting on time, according to schedule, it irritates me when the meeting doesn't start on time. I sit there and fume, "Why do they wait for the latecomers to arrive? Why are the latecomers more important than those who make the effort to come on time?" So we fuss, fume, and feed those ulcers. We live by schedules, and fume when the schedules are not kept.

Now, of course, schedules are necessary. We can hardly live in the modern world without schedules, but let's not expect too much from schedules. Schedules are a necessary attempt to make order, to put order into our lives, but do not put too much stock in scheduling. Have you had the experience of planning an important event, and then being disappointed with the outcome? You planned well, you had a well-organized schedule and followed it dutifully; but when the event was over, you sat there feeling, "Is that all?" Maybe the reason you were disappointed is that what you really desired and hoped for cannot be scheduled. God doesn't operate on our schedules, on our timetables.

In the final analysis, what is really important in life cannot be scheduled. What do you really want in life? What do you really want from Christmas? What do you really want from a relationship with God? Wealth? Fame? Not really. What do you really want from human relationships? Isn't it love? Aren't love, affirmation, a sense of feeling useful and needed, and happiness what you are really seeking? And love cannot be manipulated. Happiness cannot be scheduled. You can schedule a thanksgiving dinner. You can schedule the sending of invitations, the shopping, house cleaning, preparing the food, organizing the kitchen so the food is all hot at the same time. It takes a great deal of scheduling, a masterful job of organization and management to prepare and serve a successful Thanksgiving dinner. But no amount of scheduling, in itself, can produce happiness, family unity, joy, laughter, and love.

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You can schedule productions, but you can't schedule human feelings and human response. You can schedule Christmas, but you can't make Christmas happen. You can schedule a celebration, but you cannot manipulate God to visit. You cannot manipulate gratitude. You can't make people feel grateful. Of course, scheduling is necessary and has a strategic place in our lives, but the important, eternal, lasting, satisfying things of life cannot be scheduled.

A small resort town in the Sierra Nevada mountains has a movie theater that is open only on weekends. You cannot plan on seeing a movie, however, because for economic reasons the management has a policy of not running the film unless at least ten people show up. As soon as ten paying customers are there the movie begins, whether it is 7:00 p.m., 8:20 or even 10:00. If less than ten people come, there is "no show." There is no exact schedule.

According to our scripture text this morning, that is how God operates. Mark 13:32, "No one knows, however, when that day or hour will come...Be on watch, be alert, for you do not know when the time will come." There is no schedule for the coming of the kingdom, or rather, we humans are not let in on the schedule. Maybe God is waiting for more customers! There aren't enough people waiting, ready for the kingdom, so the kingdom is a "no show."

No one knows God's schedule. Can you imagine what a circus it would have been in Bethlehem if the arrival of the Messiah had been known? Imagine the vendors! It's bad enough there now; you are hardly off the bus before you are bombarded by the salesmen. If they had known the Messiah was coming, no doubt there would have been room in the inn for Joseph and Mary. They would have been given the royal suite, and the shepherds would not have been allowed anywhere in the vicinity!

Can you imagine what it would be like if we knew the schedule of the second coming? If we knew when the kingdom of God is coming in its fullness, can you imagine how we would mess it up? Imagine the TV coverage, those ridiculous commentators making their inane comments, "Oh, I wonder how the Messiah will be dressed. Will he really be on a white horse? We will switch now to Salt Lake City to see if they have any inside information!" Some have tried to predict. The bookstores are full of the "wisdom" of experts predicting the exact schedule. But God does not operate by human schedules. What would life be like if we knew where we were going; if we knew what was going to happen tomorrow; if we knew where we would be in ten years? Do you really want to know the future? Wouldn't you rather be surprised? Don't the mystery, the wonder, the surprises make our lives delightful experiences? If everything ~~could~~ be scheduled and planned, laid out according to some timetable, would life be boring!

No one knows God's schedule. We cannot predict, schedule, or manipulate. We wait. Bob Hamerton-Kelly, who was our biblical lecturer on the trip to the Holy Land last spring, pointed out the differences between Egyptian religion and biblical religion. After the miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt to the Sinai wilderness, our foreparents discovered God not in space, as the Egyptians believed, but in time. God was no longer located in the temples and the immovable pyramids, which were attempts to find security in the shifting desert. Now God was experienced in the wilderness as they moved about. They

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no longer lived in one place with a fixed schedule and order like they experienced while building pyramids. In the wilderness, they moved around, not on the basis of a schedule, but on need. They drank when they found water. They ate when they found food. They found God, not in a fixed place like a temple, but wherever and whenever God spoke or acted. They heard God speak. They saw God act. We now live in the times between God's words. We remember on one hand when God spoke and when God acted, and on the other hand, we anticipate the future. We wait for God to speak again. We wait for God to come again into history, into our lives, and God's visits cannot be scheduled. Glendon Harris wrote,

You never know just when Christmas will come. It might happen on the 25th of December, and again it might not. For some Christmas will come early; for others it may be later, even into next year. And for those who don't prepare, Christmas may not come at all. We're referring to God coming into our lives in a meaningful, unexpected way, not just the human celebration we schedule for an exact day and time. The message of scripture--the message of Advent--is to be ready, be watchful for God's coming into your life. You just never know when it will happen.

God comes into your life when you are ready and when God is ready. Christmas happens not necessarily on December 25, not necessarily according to your schedule; but Christmas happens when you are ready and God is ready. Sometimes we confuse the schedule with the anticipated outcome. We take care of the physical arrangements and the logistics. We purchase and wrap the gifts, send the greeting cards, cook the food, decorate the tree, make the candy, go to church, and gather with the family. It is at this point we may experience a sense of disappointment. We have scheduled, we have prepared, now where is the joy, where is the love? We get impatient, and need to understand that love and joy cannot be scheduled. You can't schedule human feelings. You can't schedule Christmas. You can't schedule the Holy Spirit's blessing. For that, you wait!

How? First, be humble. God comes to a humble heart, "a humble and contrite spirit, O God, you will not despise," wrote the psalmist. It is far easier for your spouse or your children or your parents to love you when you are humble. Humility means to be like Joseph and Mary, and be willing to sleep in the barn. Humility means putting others first, laying aside your own ambitions, needs, and desires in deference to others.

Secondly, be attentive and sensitive. Be attentive to the needs of others. What are the other people in your life feeling? What are their needs? What can you do to brighten their Christmas? How can you be a channel for God's love to pour into their lives? Be attentive to God. Listen in prayer. Read God's words in the Bible. Study. Be attentive.

Thirdly, obey. Mary and Joseph obeyed the angels. What if they hadn't obeyed? What if they didn't believe or trust the message? What if they resisted? The Messiah might never have been born. How can you be obedient to the word of God, to the will of God? This fall we are talking about "covenants" in our church. Are you faithful to your covenants? We again were reminded this morning when the new members were asked the membership vows:

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DOUGLAS NORRIS  
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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will you support the church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service? Next week we will bring our covenant giving cards and dedicate our resources to do God's work through the ministry and mission of our church. Be obedient.

Lastly, be expectant! Get ready to be surprised. Catch a glimpse of the wonder. No matter how well you plan, no matter how organized and magnificent your schedule, you cannot control the event. Look for the unpredictable. And when it happens, enjoy it. We were privileged to have our family home for Thanksgiving. On Friday evening we were watching TV. At 8:00 a movie ad was played. Someone said, "Hey, let's go see that movie!" Jennifer grabbed the newspaper and looked at the movie ads. At 9:20 we went to the movie and had a marvelous, unscheduled, spontaneous, fun evening.

Of course, schedules are necessary in our modern lives. But schedules can only go so far. You can schedule productions, but you cannot schedule human feelings and response. You can schedule Christmas, but you cannot make Christmas happen. Yes, you must schedule and plan, but then wait when God does not respond to your schedule. Wait for God to speak, wait for God to come into your life by being humble, attentive, obedient, and expectant. And don't be impatient. Enjoy the waiting period.