

Nineteenth Sunday in Year C

[Samuel Hakeem, OP](#)

Lectionary 117:

Wis 18:6-9

Ps 33:1, 12, 18-19, 20-22

Heb 11:1-2, 8-19

Luke 12:32-48

Possible preaching themes:

- Anticipation of the good things to come in Heaven can enhance our spiritual well-being. This anticipation is the virtue of hope.
- Trust in God can be difficult, due to our human experiences of betrayal. Faith is a gift which strengthens our trust in God.

Possible scientific resources:

- **On Anticipation**
 - “Well-being and Anticipation for Future Positive Events: Evidences from an fMRI Study,” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5767250/>
 - “Sequential Options Prompt Future Thinking, Boost Patience,” <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/sequential-options-prompt-future-thinking-boost-patience.html>
 - Anticipation of experiences is more satisfying than anticipation of possessions <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/were-only-human/anticipation-the-psychology-of-waiting-in-line.html>
 - Anticipatory Thinking <https://www.fs.usda.gov/rmrs/sites/default/files/Klein%20et%20al%20-%20Anticipatory%20Thinking.pdf>
- **On Trust**
 - “To Trust or Not to Trust: Ask Oxytocin” <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/to-trust-or-not-to-trust/>
 - “The Neuroscience of Trust,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201508/the-neuroscience-trust>
 - “The Neuroscience of Trust,” <https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>
 - “Oxytocin shapes the neural circuitry of trust and trust adaptation in humans,” <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18498743/>

Homily outline: Anticipation

Intro: The Board Game Experience

- Board game designer Rob Daviau needed to answer an important question: What is the most exciting part of playing a board game? (listen to 10:00-12:40 of <https://www.idlethumbs.net/3ma/episodes/class-is-in-session>)
- He commissioned a study from MIT that measured levels of arousal in board game participants from beginning to end.
 - Was it winning? The big move or lucky roll of the dice which turned things around? Could it even be losing a close game?
 - The surprising findings were that opening the box of a new board game was the most exciting part of the experience
 - There were other moments of excitement, but nothing reached the excitement levels of opening up the top of the box for the very first time, unfolding the game board, and exploring the pieces, cards, and other accessories
 - A new world of possibilities is laid out before the players, and the anticipation of what is to come causes great excitement
- Board games are not the only place where anticipation seems to be the most exciting part of an experience, e.g.,
 - Movie trailers packed with excitement, prompting us to count down the days until the movie's release
 - Starting a new job
 - A fresh sports season, where all statistics are reset and the records read "zero"
- Often our anticipation is more exciting than the experience itself
 - Board games lack the excitement we expect
 - The movie is just ok
 - The job, while exciting at first, ends up being...well...a job
 - The end of the sports season has us saying "there's always next year"
- Is anticipation just problematic, as it can often lead to disappointment or unrealistic expectations regarding the experience to come?

Anticipation of positive events leads to greater well-being and mental health

- A 2018 study examined the neural response of participants when asked to anticipate a positive event.
 - Participants were shown a series of images, some positive (smiling children, a wedding, people hugging) and some neutral (house appliances, pedestrians, people at work).
 - Brain activity was measured as the images were shown
 - Before being shown a positive image, a square would appear on the screen. Before being shown a neutral image, a circle would appear on screen.
 - Seeing a square led participants to anticipate that the next image would be a good one

- Positive anticipation makes multiple contributions to our mental health, e.g.
 - Increases reward sensitivity
 - Enhances the memory of positive stimuli
 - Relates to elevated levels of well being
 - Improves stress coping
- Other research demonstrates that it is especially the anticipation of events (e.g., a night out with friends) rather than the anticipation of some looming purchase (e.g., new clothing) that are
 - linked to greater happiness,
 - more pleasantness
 - and more excitement
- Furthermore, the ability to forgo immediate gratification for the sake of future rewards has multiple benefits, e.g.,
 - Greater physical, psychological, and even financial well-being

Gospel anticipation

- Jesus tells us to “be like servants who await their master’s return”
 - not to be afraid as our Father is pleased to give us the kingdom
- How do we practice a spiritual form of positive anticipatory thinking?
 - Cultivating the value of events over things
 - Anticipating the gift of others, even in their need, e.g., by giving alms
 - Striving to be a positive future for others in our generosity
 - A posture of preparation: “ready to open *immediately* when the master comes and knocks,” regardless of when that return may be
- Sometimes we are disappointed when reality does not meet our expectations
 - A great consolation here is the positive anticipation in Jesus and his bold words
 - The master doesn’t just return: he proceeds to *wait on the servants*
- Jesus could see past his own earthly disappointments to the fullness of life
 - He promises us the same vision, wildly exceeding human expectations

Anticipating good things enhances our spiritual well-being

- Human anticipation of good things, especially events over things, activates the brain’s medial prefrontal cortex
- Analogously anticipation of the good things of heaven
 - Glimpsed in the graced experiences of everyday life
 - Can ignite our soul
- This is the virtue of hope: setting our hearts firmly on the goodness of Heaven and living within the joy of God’s unfolding Reign
 - A joy that carries us through the difficulties and disappointments of life
 - An infectious joy that will encourage others to join in
- And so we are called to nourish an “advent” spirituality even in ordinary time
 - Waiting as Jesus has taught us to do
 - Not in fear, but in hope

- Not in banality, but in creative excitement
- Not in idleness, but in joyful preparation for the coming of our servant-master
- Not alone, but encouraging hope in everyone around us

Tags: anticipation, future, hope, neuroscience, psychology

About the Preaching with the Sciences Initiative

A primary way Roman Catholics explore their faith and nourish their spirituality is by participating in Sunday Mass and actively engaging in the homily. However, few preachers explicitly connect faith or spirituality with science. The Preaching with the Sciences initiative, made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, gathers scientists and leading homileticians to explore the positive contributions science can make to preaching, and consequently contribute to more contemporary modes of believing. Such contributions are grounded in the rich imaginations that scientists bring to their work as well as in scientific discoveries that have a potential for revealing religious truths and even shedding new insight on ancient teachings and beliefs.

With guidance from world-renowned scientists with differing areas of expertise, a select number of homileticians will draft homily outlines for preaching key Sundays and feast days across the 3-year lectionary cycle. Over 100 homily outlines will highlight some of the way's sciences and the contemporary search for religious meaning can interface. These free homiletic resources have the potential to influence thousands of preachers seeking help each week in crafting sermons and helping to shape a scientifically informed religious imagination among future preachers.