

Message for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (11/8/2020)
Matthew 25:1-13

Did you notice that the last line of today's Gospel from Matthew, what we might call the moral of the story, is a little incongruent with the rest of the parable? "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," Jesus says, meaning that we can't know in advance the precise moment that the Lord will return to usher the world into God's final celebration, so we ought to stay alert. But, it's not actually a question of waking or sleeping in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. As the groom is delayed, all the bridesmaids become drowsy and fall asleep. What is it, then, that makes a bridesmaid wise or foolish?

As it turns out, the wise bridesmaids are those who expect the unexpected. Presumably, all ten lamps burn out during the early hours of the night while the bridesmaids are napping, but only the wise bridesmaids have brought supplemental oil. So, they quickly refill their lamps and join the groom as he makes his way to the wedding banquet, while the foolish bridesmaids are left behind to scramble for fuel. In light of this observation, maybe we should translate that last phrase more freely. Instead of "Keep awake... for you know neither the day nor the hour," maybe we should read, "Keep enough oil on hand." *Regardless of the circumstances*, in other words, *be prepared*.

In any case, this isn't a story about apocalyptic hypervigilance; Jesus is not insisting that we obsessively scan our surroundings for signs of the end. Since all the bridesmaids eventually fall asleep, it's expected that we'll also go through more or

less drowsy periods in our waiting for God. **The life of faith involves both waking and sleeping, both alertness and rest.**

In the early days of the pandemic, some of us learned to love the Night Prayer liturgy from our resource, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. It was a nightly occasion to put away the day, quiet our harried hearts and minds, and relax into God's promise to hold us in love, even in a stressful time. The first words of the Gospel Canticle from Night Prayer came back to me this week as I thought about the bridesmaids in Jesus' parable: "Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace."¹ There it is: waking and sleeping, watching and resting. If the hours of both day and night are God's, then we can expect God to attend to us both in our endeavors and in our reprieve.

While we wait, therefore, while we live in the time between promise and fulfillment, what reason do we have for alertness, and what reason do we have for rest? Or, to put it another way, what does spiritual readiness look like, even as we lean into the assurance of God's saving grace?

Waking or sleeping, it's all about the oil reserve. The key is to "keep your lamp trimmed and burning" no matter the time of day, that is, to practice steady discipleship at all times. **"Having oil on hand" is a symbol of persistent faith and love, "living the life of the kingdom" now in anticipation of God's just and joy-filled future.**² "Let your light shine before others," Jesus urges in the Sermon on the

¹ Pew Edition 324.

² M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 451.

Mount, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”³ *Live now in the light of the world as God promises it will be.*

That kind of faithfulness requires vigilance and intent. Who is the neighbor whom I am called to love as myself? Who is the stranger in whose face I see the likeness of Christ? And, how does God’s justice shape my relationship to them? The answer to these questions will demand something of me, so I need to be ready.

Today, ELCA hunger ministries mark the losses we’ve suffered this year on account of COVID-19, and draw our attention to complex and deepening needs. Beth Ann Johnson, member of the Southwestern Washington Synod Hunger Committee, points to the dilemma:

In a pandemic, it could be easy for us to say, “I have to take care of my own.” And there is some truth to that: following public health recommendations is the best way to stop the spread of a virus that has taken the lives of so many of our neighbors.

But we have to beware of focusing too much on our own needs, and forgetting the needs of others. Many of us are working from home, but many others are not working at all. How can we build a more just world for them?

Housing sales are skyrocketing, while at the same time tens of thousands of our neighbors cannot pay their rent. How can we build a more just world for them?⁴

In other words, have we got enough oil to light our lamps for the sake of the unemployed, the unsheltered, the food-insecure in our communities and around the world? At the invitation of ELCA hunger ministries, in addition to supporting the feeding ministries of our congregation, today I also encourage you to make a special

³ Matthew 5:16.

⁴ Homily prepared for Sunday, November 8, 2020.

gift in support of ELCA World Hunger, Lutheran World Relief, or Lutheran Disaster Response, that one day all the world will be filled with good things.

That's what it means to wait with purpose, to be prepared. As one interpreter puts it, "The point is living expectantly and hopefully. Christian hope rests on trust that the God who created the world will continue to love the world with gentle providence, will continue the process of creation until the project is complete, and will continue to redeem and save the world by coming into it with love and grace...."⁵

Friends, to accompany the groom to the wedding banquet with lamps burning is to cooperate with the living Christ as he continues to make all things new. We may doze off from time to time, and frankly, we're better off for the rest. But, **even as we trust God to guard us sleeping, we also expect God to guide us waking, so that we're primed when it comes time to let our little light shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.**

⁵ John M. Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 286.