**Be Prepared**

Pentecost 23, Remembrance

November 8, 2020

Matthew 25: 1-13 Russell Mitchell-Walker

On June 30, we were watching a movie with a friend, nothing stressful, Monsters Inc, in 3D, when I started to feel a weird discomfort in my chest. It wasn’t the first time. I had experienced them before, 2 years previously when I was 56, the same age as my Grandfather when he died from a heart attack and as my father, when he had his first heart attack. My dad also had bypass surgery years later so I had gone through that experience with him. So, when this weird feeling had started again in the fall I went to the doctor and continued to monitor it. This particular evening, the discomfort was stronger, and eventually included pain across my chest and down both arms. At that point I knew it was something to be concerned about. We dropped off our friend on the way to emergency and arrived around 9:30 pm. Over the next few hours they ending up doing two EKGs which did not show much to be concerned about. However, the doctor had heard what I shared about my family history and taking it seriously, wanted to keep me in for continued monitoring. This was a real blessing which I am so grateful for because by 4am another EKG had shown definite irregular activity and my blood work showed my enzymes were very high. They did an angiogram which showed that there were three blockages in my heart of over 90%. They needed to do bypass surgery right away and that should happen by 8am. It was because of naming my family history that I was prepared to get this unusual pain addressed. It was the doctor knowing the family history information which prepared him to take it seriously and monitor throughout the night.

Today’s gospel is about being prepared. The so-called wise bridesmaids are prepared with extra oil for their lamps while the foolish ones are not, and miss out on the party as a result. This is an odd story, which some do not attribute to Jesus, but more to Matthew and the writers of the gospel who have had the temple destroyed after an uprising and are waiting, some impatiently, for Jesus’ return. It helps to know some cultural context of weddings of the time. Weddings were an evening affair, and happened after the fathers of the bride and groom were finished negotiating and finalizing the endowment for the bride. After that, the groom and groomsmen would go to the brides’ home to bring the bride with the bridesmaids in procession to the grooms’ house where the ceremony and celebration would take place. It could be quite late and the bridesmaids led the procession with their lamps. In our story, half of the bridesmaids, thinking ahead that it could be a long wait, maybe they had been a bridesmaid before and knew to come prepared with extra oil. The other half did not, may they hadn’t been a bridesmaid before, so they had to go buy some after the others refused to share – they did not want to risk embarrassment or shaming the groom if their lamps went out and they find themselves walking in the dark. We may wonder how the bridesmaids could buy oil after midnight, but these weddings were a community event and stores would often be open late for the guests arriving for the late festivities. The other bridesmaids were foolish for not being prepared and missed out in the big celebration – the doors were closed and the Lord of the house did not know who was arriving late. The writer encourages us to keep awake for we do not know the day or the hour.

While the message of the author of the gospel is focused on preparing to be ready for the coming of Jesus’ physical return, I believe it can be a message as well of being prepared, awake and aware to notice when Christ appears to us in our lives. We can experience the love of Christ in unexpected ways and places in our lives. Indeed, later in this chapter, Jesus talks about caring for the least of these. Whenever we do any of feeding the hungry, welcoming a stranger, clothing someone naked or those in need, visiting someone sick or in prison, Jesus says we do it to him. We can experience God’s love in Christ through others and sometimes in unexpected ways and places. If we are not awake or prepared for this, we can miss it. Has there been times when you think back on an experience or interaction with someone and saw it as a moment of grace or real blessing? These are times when we experience God’s love in our lives.

This story is about being awake and prepared so we don’t miss out on important moments; so that we are not just thinking about ourselves but considering others. Stories we hear and our experiences can enable us to be prepared, aware and awake as well. As we honour Remembrance Day today, the stories we have heard over the years, are more and more important as part of that honouring especially as there are fewer and fewer survivors. These stories can shape and inform us toward working for peace, and honouring the challenges and sacrifice those who served made. I am grateful for Ann’s story today which reminds us that we cannot frame a so-called enemy as evil. There is grace in the story shared today, an unexpected experience of God, of Christ breaking into life, with a friendly tip of a wing.

It is the stories and experience I have had with regard to heart surgery and cardiac care, that prepared me to take my symptoms seriously. Walking with my dad through his heart history was a blessing to help me prepare for this time in my life, with gratitude for the love and care received. The power of God’s love in community is that we are not alone in whatever we go through. That power, that community, can sustain us through many challenges and struggles. When we are awake to this, we can experience God in unexpected ways, and see where Christ comes to us in our lives.

 What are the experiences you have had in your life that has prepared you for challenges that you have faced or may face? Have you had experiences that have prepared you to take advantage of opportunities you would not have otherwise had? How have you been blessed with experiencing Christ in your life when you didn’t expect it or when you most needed it? May you be open to drawing on the experiences of life that will help you be prepared to take advantage of important life opportunities and not miss out on life.