

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

Sermon for November 12, 2017, Proper 27, Year A

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May our hearts continue to be open as we hear the word, sing the song, and feel the connection to the Divine. Amen.

In the summer of 2016, we experienced an Alaskan cruise. A treat from my father-in-law, this included his three children, their spouses, and their seven children. There were 15 of us total, with two of the children just a year old. Quite a way to celebrate one's 75th birthday!

The cruise left from Seattle and traveled up the coast of Canada and ultimately to the southern tip of Alaska. It was something most of us had never experienced. We sailed through glaciers, saw whales in the distance, and were treated to incredible food and drink.

One of our stops in Alaska was Sitka, a town of fewer than 9,000 people. As it was originally a Russian settlement, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church is quite prominent. And as one might expect in a Russian settlement, in the middle of the quaint downtown stands Saint Michael's Orthodox Cathedral.

This trip occurred during some sabbatical time from my church position. I plainly remember declaring "I will not go to church while on vacation!" However, intrigue combined with the tug of my husband and son convinced me otherwise. While standing inside, I was struck by the juxtaposition of the ornate beauty of the wall of icons, the beautiful altar just behind the rood screen, and the simplicity of the wooden benches, plain floor, and all the tourist paraphernalia and the milling about of all the visitors themselves in the rear of the edifice.

Turning back to the front, our attention was quickly drawn to a young man in black vestment and mitre moving toward a large icon of the Theotokos,

which in Greek and Russian orthodoxy is the Mother of God. He began to offer blessings and anointing of holy oil as he stood in front of the icon. We asked a guide if anyone was allowed to receive and she replied it was available to all. As we approached his station, the smell of myrrh began to waft into the air. Simply breathing in the holy aroma, I sensed a change within myself. I began to feel as if I were stepping into a more sacred atmosphere. The Holy oil was from an icon of the Blessed Mother in Canada, whose tears of Myrrh are thought to healing powers for the eyes.

Now, as I stood in front of him, he took a small soft bristled brush and made the sign of the cross on my forehead as he gave a blessing in Russian. Then he took the brush and gently ran it over my upper lip, presumably to allow the fragrance of the myrrh to fully penetrate the senses.

We stayed a few minutes longer then left. As we exited the cathedral, I realized tears were streaming down my face. I wondered if the myrrh was causing an allergic reaction...then I found myself needing to sit down as I began to weep. I took a moment to gather myself and then became quiet, asking my inner being what was happening. Then I heard, "I've been missing God."

After a moment with those words, my first response was "This is craziness. I spend hours in the church. I work in the church. I've worked in the church for nearly 30 years and...." Then I realized, "I AM missing God." I was missing the connection to the Divine in a personal way. My lamp had run out of oil.

Jesus' parable talks about 5 foolish bridesmaids who didn't pack enough oil to make their journey, and were left out of the wedding banquet. Some interpret the "wedding banquet" as the entrance into heaven, the call of the righteous in the last days or at least an opportunity to experience something greater than our daily lives. However, I'd like for us to explore for just these few moments that it is the opportunity to find God in a deeper

way. And if we don't have enough oil, have enough strength, enough energy or desire, we may not find it or simply miss it.

In thinking about my own spiritual revelation and this encounter, I didn't even realize I had run out of fuel. I physically felt tired from our travels and the past few months of the liturgical season and conclusion of the program year. But it took an encounter with a stranger in a funny hat, with miraculous oil from a weeping icon from another country to bring forth what was within my own spirit. God reached out to me with the Holy Oil and got my attention. Was it serendipity, did I subconsciously create or make this experience come to fruition? Or could it have been that the Spirit strategically intersected with me at the perfect moment. In the words of Janet Ruffing in her book "Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings" let me share this, "Of even greater surprise is the possibility that God longs for us as much as we do for God."

The readings as we come to the close of the liturgical year bring such powerful and metaphorical references to the path, a journey, and especially today, the theme of light. In thinking about our own path or journey, do we have enough oil in our lamps? Do we have enough fuel to reach our goal?

In answering this question, I turn back to the propers for the day. The Christian journey, at least as chronicled by the three year cycle of readings, brings this particular story up every three years, along with these particular supportive readings from the Old Testament, Wisdom and Epistle. I especially love A Song of Wisdom, verses 3 and 4 in which we hear "To the saints she gave the reward of their labors, and led them by a marvelous way. She was their shelter by day and blaze of stars by night." We hear in the Epistle about the trumpet sounding and the dead rising to "be caught up in the clouds together...to meet the Lord in the air." Prophetically this speaks of the coming of Christ and the the dead rising into heaven, and I think of part of that experience would be being surrounded by the Light.

The readings coalesce with the Gospel and the image of the bridesmaids carrying their lamps, **their light**, eagerly entering the banquet hall to meet the bridegroom.

How does this cyclical revelation of light and the journey allow us to experience the Divine in a deeper way? That answer is of course a personal one and each of us has our own story and our own path.

What I can say for my own journey and that unique experience of being anointed by the Russian cleric, is it was my avenue to a deeper understanding of God's presence in my life. It has allowed me to explore depths of spirituality I may have overlooked, or never thought I needed. Ultimately, it has led me to a completely new path in my life. While my thirty year ministry as a musician continues as part of my life, especially here assisting Lisa at the organ which I dearly love, my call to ministry has changed to focus on that of healing and spirituality. Had I not been open to following the gentle nudges along my way, I may have missed what I now believe to be an amazing part of my story. And I would not be standing here, being humbled, delivering this homily to you.

How long has it been since you felt the presence of the Divine in your life? How long has it been since you allowed yourself to sit quietly and hear what the Spirit says? The miraculous is happening all around, all the time. God is "desiring us as much as we desire God" on a regular basis. Are we open enough to see and hear? Are we willing to follow the path? Is your lamp lit, filled with oil, and ready for the journey?

To reframe the Gospel in the form of two questions and a statement: "ARE YOU awake, ARE YOU keeping watch. REMEMBER, you know not when the Bridegroom comes."

I close with two quotes. The first is the text of our communion anthem "Keep Your Lamps" by Andre Thomas, which will be sung as our communion anthem and has been an influence on my thoughts as I

prepared this homily: “Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, the time is drawing nigh. Christians don’t get weary, till your work is done. Christian journey soon be over. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, the time is drawing nigh.”

Finally, I share a quote from the wisest of wizards in the Harry Potter world, Albus Dumbledore, who said this about light: “Happiness can be found in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the **light**.”