

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Psalm 78:1-7

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

Even if we didn't grow up as a Boy Scout or a Girl Scout, somewhere along the way during our childhood we were taught...or perhaps we discovered...that being prepared was a good thing. Being prepared meant that we planned ahead. We thought through what lay just ahead. If we were really conscientious we prepared not only for what we thought would happen, but we prepared for what *could* happen. We even prepared for the unexpected which takes some imagination. We went through an entire litany of "What if's." What if this happens? What if that happens? What if it doesn't happen? What if? What if? What if? That's the mantra of those who plan ahead and anticipate every contingency they can think of. So...why is being prepared a good thing? It can make a project go more smoothly. It can improve the chances of success in whatever we're trying to do. It means that we can shift gears rather smoothly if we need to. In the extreme, it could even save our lives. In the case of the parable we just heard in the gospel of Matthew, saving our lives is exactly what Jesus is talking about. He's still teaching us about the nature of the kingdom of heaven and he is literally telling us how to prepare for our entry into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells us that there are certain things we need to do in this life to prepare for the next. And apparently there is a timeline and a time limit.

For this parable, Jesus uses the very emotionally-laden experience of a wedding to teach us what we need to know. To understand this parable, it's helpful to know about the wedding customs in first century Palestine. When a young couple decide to marry, the groom's father and the bride's father broker a deal and together they give their approval. The groom then begins building onto his own father's house to provide living space there for his bride and, hopefully, the family they will create together. When the building is complete...which can take a year or more...the groom sends word to his bride that he is on his way to retrieve her from her own father's house and take her back to his father's house for their wedding and their new home and the beginning of their new life together. The bridesmaids prepare the bride for the

wedding while they wait at her father's house for the groom to arrive. Knowing that his arrival will probably be late in the day, the bridesmaids each carry an oil lamp to light the way for the procession of the bride and groom back to the groom's father's house and the wedding itself. Without those lamps to light the way, they would surely stumble and might even get lost.

In Jesus' parable about this wedding ritual, he is teaching about the nature of the kingdom of heaven which is the wedding banquet to which all believers will be invited. Jesus as the bridegroom is a familiar metaphor for Christians. He's gone to prepare a place in his father's house for his bride, the church. However, in *this* parable, the groom is delayed and he does not return as expected. Jesus is warning his listeners that his return may, in fact, be delayed...and we don't know for how long. To date, Jesus' return to collect his bride has been delayed for two thousand and twenty years. We can relate to 'delayed!' Jesus is teaching us about how to live expectantly while we wait...how we should prepare for a delayed return. Jesus' followers believed that it would happen within their lifetime, but it didn't...and Jesus knew it wouldn't. And it didn't happen in the lifetimes of multiple generations who followed them either. We are among those multiple generations...and like those Christians who went before us...we are wondering why Jesus has been delayed...and what we should do to remain ready and vigilant lest he reappear and we are unprepared.

That could happen, couldn't it? He could return and find us unprepared even though we've had two thousand and twenty years to get ready for him. And there are a number of parables Jesus uses to warn us about being unprepared for his eventual return. He's given us a 'heads up' to remain vigilant and expectant as we wait for him no matter how long it takes. Do we have enough oil in our lamps? Have we accumulated reserves of oil to use in the event that Jesus does not return in our lifetimes? What *is* the oil for expectant Christians and how do we replenish it? How do we keep that internal flame lit and burning strong so that it can shine through us and light not only our way, but the way for others as well?

The light we need to keep burning is the light of Christ within us. And the light of Christ can shine through us as we adopt those practices that Jesus recommended to us as a way of life: service to others above all else...care for the poor, the grieving, the sick and physically disabled, the shunned, the disadvantaged, the orphaned, the imprisoned and those living on the margins of our world. That's where Jesus has told us to put our time, our attention, our energy, our resources, and our love. He's already told us that when you do something kind for one of the least of these, you have done it to him. Those practices replenish the oil that keeps the light of Christ burning within us.

But it's not just our selfless actions, it is our prayer life with God through Jesus as well. How often do we pray? How intently and passionately do we pray? Does it always have to be formal prayer out of the Book of Common Prayer? Not at all. Our prayers consist of our willingness to offer up to God whatever is on our minds and in our hearts in whatever language best expresses those thoughts and feelings. It's about our willingness to be completely open with God...open in a way that we are open to no other. With God, no secrets are hid. We aren't going to tell him anything He doesn't already know...which frees us up to be absolutely honest with God...perhaps more honest with God than we are even with ourselves...at least initially. When we begin to pray, we may find ourselves startled by what we actually say...verbally or silently. Sometimes in those prayers, God illuminates something for us that we've never seen very clearly before...something about ourselves...perhaps something that we have hidden from ourselves because of fear or shame. All of us have parts of ourselves that we desperately do not want to see. In our prayers with God, the scales may fall from our eyes and God allows us to see clearly and painlessly because God forgives even before we ask. Prayer replenishes our soul and the light of Christ that is burning within us.

But good works and prayer are not enough all by themselves. We replenish that light within us when we study Holy Scripture...alone and with each other. Solitary study is great, but we learn the subtle messages within those scriptures whenever two or more are gathered in Jesus' name

and he is with us. It is the interplay among us that brings Jesus to each of us. Solitary study is great preparation for the study we do with other Christians replenishing their own light.

And we replenish our light when we learn to lean into our faith...the faith we trust our souls to; ...the belief that Jesus has paved the way for us to be reunited with our Father and Creator at the end of our time on this earth. By leaning into that faith...and leaning *on* that faith...we strengthen that faith. It is the strengthened faith that provides the buoy...the life jacket...to hold us up when times are hard...when disaster looms before us...when tragedy strikes...when we don't see a clear path to a safe and secure future. The mantra: "God's in charge!" can replenish that faith and keep it strong.

These are the things that replenish us...just as the additional oil replenished the supply that kept the lamps burning for the five wise bridesmaids. And this is why they couldn't lend their extra oil to the five foolish bridesmaids. Internal resources that we build within ourselves are things that we can tell others about, but they aren't transferable. We can't build someone else's resources for them or give them ours...so the five wise bridesmaids couldn't share their inner resources with the five foolish bridesmaids who had not built their own. It wasn't a question of the wise ones being stingy. Each one of us has to build our own internal resources for ourselves even as we may lean on and learn from those whose inner resources appear to be plentiful.

And at the end of the parable...when the five foolish bridesmaids have finally gotten a replenishment of oil and show up to the wedding feast, they find the door is closed and they aren't allowed in. This is not a matter of cruelty on the part of the host of the feast. It's a statement of fact about the way things are. There comes a time when it's too late. The door is closed. The time is up. Most of us live as if we had all the time in the world...as if we were going to live forever...and we foolishly think we can afford to put off until another day something that we can see needs to be done. We don't have all the time in the world even if it seems we do. As hard as it is to admit, our time is limited. There will come a time for each one of us when our

time here in this world will be up. It will be too late to take care of the things we wanted to take care of in this life, but didn't. The door on all those things we were going to do later will be closed...never to be re-opened. Do we have some unfinished business here weighing on our hearts? Do we have a relationship in need of repair? Is there something that our hearts want desperately to do? Are there things we need to take care of before it's too late...before the door is closed never to be re-opened?

Jesus teaches us to plan ahead. He tells us to prepare ourselves as we wait for him. Like the bridegroom, He's coming back to retrieve us. That was his promise. He encourages us to replenish ourselves on a regular basis so that he can continue to shine through us and so that we will be prepared to enter into the kingdom of God when the time comes. The greatest peace and happiness we ever know in this world is when we are aware of Christ shining through us and God walking with us. Be prepared.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.