

Wise Waiting

By
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from the pulpit of
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Amos 5:18-24

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’

⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’

¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

As we approach a new church year which arrives in early December with the beginning of Advent, the lectionary readings for this month dish up some difficult parables. Matthew 25 is comprised of three parables about the coming Reign of God. Today the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, next Sunday, the Parable of the Talents or perhaps better described as the Wise and Foolish Investors, and finally, the more familiar Great Judgement when God separates the sheep from the goats, and we are reminded that to be in the lineup toward heaven we should look for Christ in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the imprisoned.

These are challenging texts about God's expectations and judgment. Imagine most of us would prefer to hear the more comforting stories of God's unconditional love and grace. But given what is going on in our nation and our world, not to mention the moral perplexities of our individual lives, perhaps a reminder of God's judgment is a word of grace. Like a loving parent who does not just let anything go in order to keep children safe and equip them to live with a moral compass, an occasional reminder that God is both Redeemer and Judge, seems worthy of our attention in these fraught and violent days.

Today, the prophet Amos has already set up this series of three sermons on God's coming judgment by proclaiming: God has no interest in our worship if our praises are not paired with acts of justice and righteousness. The prophet says: No matter the solemnity in the sanctuary, or the size of your offering, God takes no delight in your worship unless you act to let *justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream.*

Organizational psychologist at Wharton Business School, Adam Grant, has a new book out called *Hidden Potential: The Science of Achieving Greater Things* in which he presents three ways to unlock human potential: Lean into discomfort; Keep things interesting; Ask for Advice. I would suggest these three difficult parables follow a similar template in order to help us achieve a greater faithfulness in our discipleship. They

make us uncomfortable. They keep things interesting by requiring we have to work to unravel their meaning. And we can read them, as a source of advice for the living of our days. They too can reveal our hidden potential for honoring God by living the faith. We begin with the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids.

It helps to know a bit about the wedding customs of Jesus' day. Guests assembled at the home of the bride and were entertained by her parents while waiting for the groom. When the bridegroom approached, the guests and wedding party lighted torches, went to greet him, and then everyone followed in a joyful procession to the groom's home where the wedding took place followed by a banquet hosted by his parents.¹

At wedding rehearsals I always remind the wedding party they have an important job to do, and it's not just to stand there and look good and have someone hold the rings. They are witnesses. They lead the gathering of family and friends in making this vow: "Do you give your blessing to *Name of One* and *Name of the Other*, and promise to do everything in your power to uphold them in their marriage?" In so doing, the wedding party IS casting a vision for the future by expressing their promise of ongoing friendship, love and support. Their vow helps equip the vows the couple is about to make to each other. At the heart of every wedding there is a profound hope that the future will unfold in joy, and when sickness and sorrow inevitably come, as they do in any long marriage, faithfulness to one another will prevail – come what may.

Likewise, the bridesmaids in Jesus' parable have a job to do. It's not all about fancy clothes, lovely flowers and dancing the night away; it's about keeping the flame of hope burning. Biblical scholars agree that -- we have to read this parable allegorically -- as a story that imparts something important about the Kingdom of God, beyond the details. Because the details are problematic. It's a parable about a wedding, for example, but there is no bride! It ends with a punchline that admonishes

¹ John Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 4, p. 284.

us to “keep awake” but all ten of the bridesmaids fall asleep, because the bridegroom is not just late; he’s rudely delayed until midnight. When he arrives, the foolish ones have to go out, in the middle of the night to awaken a shopkeeper presumably, to buy more oil because the wise ones don’t share an ounce with them, and when they return to the party, the door is slammed shut.

How are we to interpret this parable when earlier in the same gospel Jesus said: *For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.* The first thing to understand is that it is not asking, “Which kind of bridesmaid are you?” Rather, it asks: in light of the fact that the full reign of God has not yet arrived, are we prepared to wait wisely?²

It takes no imagination to look around and see that the day of God’s reign is delayed. The day has not come where there is peace on earth, and love abounds, and people get along, and the worship of God is realized in acts of justice and righteousness. So, in the meantime, how do we wait? We engage our hope in the future of God’s coming by lighting the way for the arrival now.

Biblical scholar Alyce McKenzie put it this way: “As we live out our faith in an imperfect, troubled world, this parable can motivate us to take action.”³ In response to injustice, cruelty, violence, war, hunger and poverty we can make sure that we have the resources to keep our lamps filled with courage born of prayer, with acts of love and mercy, with the support of partners and community to do the good deeds of God in the present while we wait.

It interests me that recently there have been so many books - now made into films and television series - that have featured the trauma, the resistance, the complexity and the bravery demonstrated during World

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion.

³ Alyce McKenzie, “Bridesmaids, the Time is Now.”

War Two. *Oppenheimer* about the development of the atomic bomb, *A Small Light* about Miep Gies hiding Otto Frank's family in Amsterdam, *All the Light We Cannot See* about the experience of children during the war, and *A World on Fire* currently running on PBS. It's apparent that going on eighty years down the road we can look back and see some of the lessons gained more clearly, but it is also a way of finding meaning in our current warring reality.

When I tune into any of these recollections of World War Two, I am always reminded of Phillip Haille's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. He researched how the people of that small French Village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, unlike many other French towns, hid so many Jews from the Nazis. Phillip Haille found that a major reason was because of the constant, steady nurture of the church. He credited Pastor Trocme who preached simple biblical sermons week after week. Haille interviewed one old parishioner who faked a heart attack when the Nazis came looking for Jews. She had a family hidden out back under her chicken house. When asked why she did this, she replied, "Pastor always told us, 'One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something for him.'" She went on: "On the Sunday that the German soldiers came into town, in his sermon, the pastor repeated these words, 'One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something for him... Everybody in the congregation quietly nodded their heads. We all knew what we had to do. We were prepared for it.'"⁴ It is estimated that small town saved the lives of nearly five thousand people.

One day Jesus will come into your life...Embedded in this harsh sounding parable is indeed a word of grace. God equips us for Wise Waiting by giving us hope that Jesus is coming, by suggesting that we be practiced and prepared to do something for him. These days, it may be difficult to see how the arc of the universe is bending toward justice, or how God's reign of peace is actually approaching, or even how God is present in the midst of our personal struggles in an apparent,

⁴ Will Willimon recounts this story in Pulpit Resources, vol. 36, p.27-28.

undeniable way. By our human standards, as when Matthew's congregation was tired of the delay of Christ's return, God may be moving too slowly for us, God may be delayed somehow and arriving too late.

But take heart. This parable is not meant to scare us to death that we might be locked out of the party. It is meant to remind us there are wise ways to wait for God's coming. Each time we work for justice we light the way for the full reign of Christ. Each time we bear each other's burdens, we illumine a path through another's darkness. Each time we advocate for the poor, or reach out to the friendless, or work to make this world a more peaceful place, we show forth the coming of the Risen Christ. All we need to do to Wait Wisely is to remember: "One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something for him" and to stoke that memory, to fuel that memory with hope, good works, and spiritual reserves to keep our lamps filled for light.

AMEN.