

“Are You Ready?”

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Matthew 25:1-13 (NRSV)

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. [2] Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

[3] When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; [4] but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. [5] As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

[6] But at midnight there was a shout,
'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'

[7] Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

[8] The foolish said to the wise,
'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'

[9] But 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.'

[10] And 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.

[11] Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.'
[12] But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

[13] Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

NO PREPARATION POSSIBLE

This morning's passage would be a good one to use on scout Sunday.
Remember their motto? Be prepared.

But, sometimes things happen that we can't anticipate.

Sometime things happen that defy preparation.

I got a letter this week from some church members who use to live in Good Samaritan Village.

They weathered the hurricane.

Everything seemed fine.

And then the water began to rise.

Their apartment was flooded.

Treasures that they had gathered from all over the world...lost.

They thought they were prepared but...

...they couldn't imagine a flood destroying their home after the storm was over.

Now they're trying to start over in a new town.

Many of us have experienced tragedies like this that strike like a bolt out of the blue.

But, none of us could imagine what happened last Sunday.

A congregation...not that much different from ours began their morning worship.

And then, halfway through the service,

they were viciously attacked by a deranged gunman.

Twenty six people lost their life and many more were injured.

The pastor's wife said that most of their congregation was now gone.

They didn't understand how something like this could happen.

They weren't prepared.

Was there something that they could have done to prevent or lessen that tragedy?

Many churches in our Presbytery were asking that very question.

In response our Executive Presbyter sent out an email.

He included several reports from various agencies suggesting things we could do to prepare.

I read some of those reports some from various denominational bodies and one from FEMA.

Let me summarize multiple pages in one sentence.
They all said the same thing.

Form committees and have lots of meetings!
That's a Presbyterian response if ever there was one!

I don't think there really is any way to prepare for something like this.

Sometimes we are at the mercy of events that are beyond our control.

We are mortal.
And sometimes no amount of planning can help us survive the storm.

But, as Christians we have a hope that reaches beyond the tragedies of life.

LEAN INTO THE LORD

The pastor of that Baptist Church in Texas said that he couldn't even begin to understand why that tragedy happened. But, he was determined to "lean on the Lord" and not lean on his own understanding.

This pastor had lost his adopted 14 year old daughter and almost half his congregation.

But, he had not lost his faith.
He believed that there was more to the story.

He did not know what to make of that terrible tragedy, but he was still willing to put his faith in God.

That man was prepared...
prepared spiritually.

He wasn't prepared for an active shooter to come into his congregation.
But, he was prepared to trust in the Lord in this time of tragedy.

And even in a time of overwhelming grief,
he wanted everyone to know that though his life was shaken violently
...his faith in God was still in tact.

Hopefully none of us will have a test as severe as this one.
But, all of us will experience a time of trial.
How do we prepare for that time?

We prepare by focusing on eternity.
We prepare by focusing on the power of resurrection.

We believe that we have hope for more than this life.
We have hope for life beyond this life.

I would contend that preparing for eternity is the most important thing that
we do in life.

If we really believe what we say we believe,
if we really believe that in life and in death we belong to God,
how does that affect what we do today?
How might our priorities change if we had an eternal perspective?

THE PARABLE

That's what our lesson for today is all about.
It's a story about how we should prepare for the eternal kingdom that
comes.

It's a parable.
In other words, it's a symbolic story that gives us a glimpse into the king-
dom of God.

In the story, ten bridesmaids were waiting for the groom to come
and call them to the wedding party.

Five were wise and five were foolish.
Five prepared ahead of time by having extra oil for their lamps.

Five didn't.

At midnight they hear the alarm.
The bridegroom is coming.

The ten bridesmaids awaken and trim their lamps.
The five who didn't prepare ask the five who did to share their oil.

But, there is not enough to go around.

So the foolish bridesmaids leave to buy some extra oil in the middle of the night.

Good luck with that.
No Seven Elevens in the ancient world.
They would have to wake up a local merchant.

And while the foolish bridesmaids are gone, the bridegroom comes.
Those who were ready went with him.
The others were left behind.

Later the foolish bridesmaids make it to the house where the wedding party is taking place.
But, they are not allowed to come in and join the festivities.

They cry out, "Lord, lord, open to us."
And the bridegroom replies, "I do not know you."

When it comes to a wedding party, the word of the bridegroom is final.

The bridesmaids missed out on the party because they weren't prepared.

DETAILS EXPLAINED

Now the details of this story seem a little odd to us because they describe the wedding customs of another culture.

In our culture the wedding ceremony lasts about an hour followed by a reception that can last from an hour to the rest of the evening.

In Palestine a wedding called for a truly huge celebration that could last for days.

Parties were that rare opportunity to relax in the ancient world. Everyone turned out to accompany the couple to their new home.

The caravan went by the longest possible route so that everyone could wish the couple well as they embarked on this new phase of their life. A wedding was truly an event that was celebrated by the whole community.

There was Jewish saying which went,
“Everyone from six to sixty will follow the marriage drum.”

Some of the rabbis even suggested that the study of the law could be abandoned in favor of participating in the marriage feast.

The customs in the Middle East are similar even today.

One commentator told of encountering ten maidens playing a musical instrument as he entered a Galilean town. The driver of his cab told him as these young ladies danced in from of their car that these were bridesmaids keeping the bride company until the bridegroom arrived.

When asked if it might be possible to see the wedding, the driver replied with a shrug,

“Who knows?”

It might be tonight.
It might be tomorrow.
It might be the night after that.

Nobody knows for certain.”

He went on to explain that one of the great things to do at a wedding was to catch the bridal party napping.

It was quite common for the bridegroom to come unexpectedly in the middle of the night with a man shouting in front of him saying,

“Behold, the bridegroom is coming.”

So, if you want to attend this party,
you have to be ready at all times.
You have to be prepared.

Jesus said that it is the same with the kingdom of God.

You don't know when the decisive day will come
...so you have to live your whole life with a certain sense of expectation.

THE CROSS AND THE RESURRECTION

It's important to note the background for this parable.
Jesus' conflict with the religious and political leaders had escalated.

The day of the cross loomed near.

And yet we know that the cross would not spell the end of Jesus' ministry.

It would be the beginning of the kingdom of God.
With the resurrection the bridegroom would make his surprising return.

No one was ready for that.
They weren't prepared for such an earth shaking, one of a kind event.

No one expected the kingdom of God to come so soon.

And they certainly were not prepared for a resurrection.

But, that's what they got.
Preparations for a proper burial gave way to a celebration.

The funeral had turned into a wedding feast.

We do know that the bridegroom will come at a time we do not expect.

We know that God's elect will come from all over the world to sit at table in
God's kingdom.
We know.

But we don't know when.
So how do we prepare?

OIL FOR OUR LAMPS

This parable has a curious detail.
The five wise bridesmaids didn't share their oil with the five foolish bridesmaids.

Why not?
Didn't they know that it is nice to share with others?

I have a relative who once referred to this parable as the parable of the five stingy bridesmaids!

They weren't stingy.
They just didn't have enough to share.
If they were to make it to the party, they needed all the oil they had.

What does this mean?

The main point of the parable is the need to get ready for the kingdom that comes.

So the oil in this passage represents what is needed to prepare for that kingdom. We need oil for our lamps. And maybe that oil is faith.

Faith is needed to light the way so that we can make it to the great wedding.

And when it comes to faith, everyone has to get their own supply.

There are some things that we can share.
And there are some things that we can't share.

I can share what I believe.
But, no matter how much I might want another person to believe, they must come to faith on their own.

All of us must make our own spiritual preparations.
All of us must make our own leap of faith.

No one else can do it for us.

And we can't prepare for the big moments of life at the last minute.
You can't buy flood insurance when the rain is falling, and the flood is on the way.

You can't buy a generator at Home Depot when the hurricane is about to hit.

And you can't find faith in the middle of the night when the time of testing comes.

You either have enough faith to meet the situation or you don't.

The foolish bridesmaids finally make to the party.
But, it's too late.

The door is shut.
And the bridegroom doesn't let these foolish bridesmaids in.

He says, "I have no idea who you are."

What is it that keeps the bridesmaids from entering?
Their lack of preparation.
They weren't ready when the big moment came.

They had no oil for their lamps.

SPECULATION IS NOT PREPARATION

Many worry about being ready when the end time comes.

And they often become very interested in those who speculate about when that will be.

They worry constantly about being ready and not being left behind.
They've even written books and made movies about it.

False prophets sometimes gain the attention of the news media when they predict that a particular date marks the end of the world.

I want you to know that I have personally survived five ends of the world in my own lifetime!

Speculation about the end times is not a good way to prepare for the end times.

Indeed, it has proved to be a colossal waste of time.

We don't prepare by worrying ourselves sick over a future we can't control.

COMPASSION

On the other hand, because there are many crackpots who talk about the end times, please don't think that we shouldn't prepare.

We should prepare for the kingdom that comes. That's what this passage is all about. The key is in how we prepare.

Remember, I said that faith is the oil that keeps our lamps burning. Well faith is the fruit of compassion.

The Bible tells us we prepare for the coming kingdom by doing simple acts of compassion.

When we lift up those who are broken,
when we love and forgive one another,
as God in Christ first loved and forgave us,

...that prepares us for the kingdom that comes.

And there's good news in this.

Even the smallest act of compassion counts...a cup of cold water for some who is thirsty, a loaf of bread for someone who is hungry...small acts of compassion have big results when it comes to the life of faith.

The Bible tells us that in the end this is how God will judge.

This is how God will separate the sheep from the goats.

Jesus said,
 The sheep are the ones who show compassion to those who suffer.
 And the goats are the ones who ignore the needs of those who suffer.

Just that simple.
 And just that hard.
 (Matthew 25:31-46)

It's not about who has the best theology.
 It's about who has the biggest heart.

In our passage for today, Jesus is still talking to those religious leaders who
 "talked the talk" but didn't walk the walk.

He's desperately trying to convince them.
 Time is short,
 He want to warn them that their lack of compassion will eventually leave
 them out in the dark.

And Jesus is talking to us as well.
 Our time is short.
 And you may have noticed that in our world, compassion is in short supply.

It's time to get ready for the kingdom that comes.

I had a chemistry teacher who used to say,
 "Chance favors the prepared mind."

In other words, many people might see something that is scientifically sig-
 nificant.
 But, only the person trained as a scientist is prepared to see the signifi-
 cance of that event.

In the same way practicing the compassion of Christ prepares us to under-
 stand the spiritual significance of the things that happen in our life.

And ultimately this prepares us for the kingdom that comes.

We prepare for a party to end all parties.
 We too are on on the march to a wedding...

the wedding feast of the Lamb, the heavenly banquet of the kingdom of God.

WEDDING PREPARATION

When I counsel people before a wedding,
I always tell them that they don't have to spend a lot of money to have a meaningful wedding.

The best preparation for a wedding is not working on a big reception.
The best preparation for a wedding is working on their relationship.

If the relationship is sound, even the simplest wedding ceremony is profound.

If the relationship is shaky, even the most elaborate ceremony will not make it last.

I think that there is a parallel between preparing for a wedding and preparing for the kingdom of God.

The most important thing is not big buildings, great crowds and elaborate words.

The most important thing is the relationship.

Remember what Jesus said was the greatest commandment?
I preached on it just a few weeks ago.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind ...
and love you neighbor as yourself.”

That's how we prepare.

We work on those two relationships...
loving God and loving neighbor.

This is the oil that fires our lamp
and shines light on our way.

And so with the children we sing,

“Give me oil in my lamp
keep me burning.

Give me oil in my lamp I pray.
Give me oil in my lamp
keep me burning.

Keep me burning till the break of day.

Sing hosanna.
Sing hosanna.
Sing hosanna
to the servant king.

Sing hosanna.
Sing hosanna.
Sing hosanna let us sing.”

Amen.