

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Lighting Lamps

Joshua 24

November 12, 2023

Today's gospel passage is the first of three parables in Matthew 25 that we'll hear over the next three weeks, and they invite us to reflect on eternal life and the coming of Christ. Each of them poses a question: *Are you sure you're ready for this?* This is the question that the readings set before us in the weeks between All Saints and Christ the King Sunday as we come to the end of the church year. Are you ready for this? If you want a simple way to be clear on what's going on, think of the line about Aslan in Narnia, "Is he safe? Of course, he isn't safe, but he's good." Remember that because the emphasis in these days is on how he is not safe.

Jesus tells a parable of ten bridesmaids invited to a wedding feast, a symbol of the Kingdom of Heaven. In that time, it was customary for weddings to be celebrated at night, so the procession of guests took place with lit lamps, carried by bridesmaids. At this wedding, some bridesmaids are foolish; they take lamps but do not bring oil for the lamps. Wise ones bring the lamps along with oil. The bridegroom is late in arriving, and they all fall asleep. A voice alerts them that the groom is about to arrive; so they scurry to attention. The foolish ones realize at that moment they do not have oil for their lamps; the wise ones reply they don't have extra oil to give. While the foolish ones rush out to buy oil for the lamps, they are too late. The wise ones enter the banquet hall with the groom, and the door is closed. The others arrive too late and are turned away. It's a tough ending, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you."

It is clear from this story that Jesus wants to tell us that we must be prepared for his coming. And that the cost of not being prepared is high. His coming is not only the final coming but also everyday encounters, great and small. We might say the lamp of faith is fueled by the oil of love, lit by those who hold on to hope. This may be one way of allegorizing the images; at any rate, it expresses the purpose of life: to hold hope, expressed in love, in faith in the one who comes and is coming. And to do all of this at the ready, at all times. Watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour, your lamp will be needed.

Keep awake Jesus punctuates the parable. Keep awake. This is one of the major, repeated themes of gospel warning: keep awake, keep alert, watch. The Lord is coming. You don't know when you'll meet him so be ready at all times. Be ready now. We associate this theme and these messages with the Advent season and for good reason. We will hear this injunction again when we come to the 4 weeks of Advent in December. Advent prepares us for the celebration of Christ's coming at Christmas, and begins the church's year with: we need God to come, we want God to come; are we ready for God to come? Are we sure?

Are you? This isn't just a question for the Advent season. It's a question posed to us even now. Something ominous goes on in the lectionary readings after All Saints Day. As sure as the days grow darker and shorter, the tone of the Sunday readings changes. It's quite dramatic when

you notice it, a new sense of urgency, and danger. The preacher Fleming Rutledge suggests that we should think of Advent as a 7-week series, beginning today. “Advent is the dialectic between waiting and the hastening, the faithful confidence that strains forward toward the day and the long endurance required to wait for it (*Advent*, 95).” Even if we stretched Advent to 7 weeks, we might not be going far enough. Karl Barth, for one, insisted that the church has no other time in this world but that of Advent—the in-between time. This is a strong theme in Matthew’s Gospel. It’s always Advent. We are always in a time of waiting and hastening, of confidence that strains forward and the long endurance in waiting for it.

With the ominous ending to the foolish bridesmaids who weren’t prepared, the season of warning has begun. Rutledge gets to the heart of it: if some say faith is for the weak-minded, invite them to worship in this season. This is the most tough-minded of all the seasons. Faith is not for wimps. When we gather in this season, we are confronted by the scripture with a fresh urgency, God is good. God is not safe. If we’re going to tangle with God and entangle our lives with God, we need to know this.

Today’s Old Testament reading makes this plain.

Joshua gathers the people together at Shechem and recounts the history of God’s goodness to them through their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through deliverance from Egypt, God’s provision to them through the wilderness, and making a home in the promised land. God has been good to you.

Then one of the famous lines from all the Bible:

“Therefore, choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods in the region beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

We have a choice, and it is set before us. You have lots of options all around you for what you will give your life to. There are shiny things all around with their promises of benefit to you. There’s a Golden Corral buffet of deities and distractions. If you’re going to give your life to one of them, go on and just do it now.

All the people heard this, and they resoundingly replied, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods . . . The Lord has been so good to us. We also will serve the Lord.”

And Joshua replied unlike any evangelist at any revival that I’ve ever heard of to the mass response of the congregation who voices their faith saying, “We also will serve the Lord;” Joshua replied, “No, you won’t.” Faith is not for wimps. God is good. God is not safe. You may know the goodness of God but do not yet know the fear of God.

Do we?

We don't talk much about the fear of God. Indeed we try to dissuade it lest anyone have an idea that God is a patriarchal ogre whose anger burns hot and whose mercy is thin. We've moved a long way from Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon, where he pictured human souls dangling over the pit of fire by only the thin thread of a spider's silk, held there only by the patience and mercy of an enduring God. We've come a long way. God, today, is kindhearted and loving. God is welcoming and always forgiving. God is good and gracious and kind and available. God is our buddy and is just kind of happy to get any attention from us at all. We're pretty busy, you know.

Joshua heard something like this in their response. He heard some echo of this. Maybe they didn't say it explicitly, but he heard it in their voice or maybe saw it in their eyes or maybe he just knew what people are like. What he heard was not "We will serve the Lord with you." What he heard was "We will serve the Lord, alongside everything else that we'll also serve."

And has there ever been a more truthful, if sly, confession of faith? Yes, we will add the Lord God to everything else that claims our attention and duty when it's convenient for us. God is good after all. So we will include God somewhere tucked in amongst our commitments, and we'll love God along with everything else that we love.

Joshua stands there and says no, you won't do that. God is good. God is also jealous. God wants you, wants all of you, and nothing less than that is going to do. God is zealous for what is precious to him. And you are precious to him. Are you ready for a God like that? You're going to have to choose. And the choice is set before you this day. Are you ready?

We are ready, they said.
We will be ready, we say.

This is the Advent ritual:
We will be ready.
Lord, in your mercy, help us be ready.

In the parable, all the bridesmaids fall asleep. Did you notice that? All 10 of them fall asleep. The punch of the story is "stay awake," but all of them in the story, the ones called foolish and the ones called wise—they all dozed off. Human frailty is accounted for. God knows our weaknesses. We all doze off. On our own, by our own will, we cannot stay awake, we cannot be faithful as we are called to be. We need God's mercy and patience and help. Perpetual alertness isn't expected, or possible. What is expected is that we are ready when the moment comes, and it may come at any time, at any day in the glory of God's inbreaking or in the subtle presence of a stranger or friend.

It's because of this reality that monks around the world wake every single day of the year, and the first words of morning prayer and the first words of Psalm 70, "O God come to our assistance, come quickly to help us." It's a prayer voiced in the 1st person plural because it's a

prayer we can only share and embody as a community. This is our prayer, too. We will serve the Lord. Come to my assistance. We will stay awake. Come quickly to help us.

The life of faith is a life of trust that stakes its claim on all of our lives, all our faith, all our love, all our hope, and our choice of whom to serve. The creedal confession, 'He will come again to judge the living and the dead' expresses the eschatological, even apocalyptic tenor of the New Testament, and especially Matthew's gospel.

There will come a time when the world will be put right. Notice the passive voice. The world will be put right. There is divine agency and power in this putting right, and no principalities, no powers, nor things past, nor present, nor things to come can overcome it. Our task, then, is to remember who we are in such a world over which there is such a promise. From the first words of Jesus to the church in Matthew at the Sermon on the Mount until this parable in the last days before the crucifixion: you are the light of the world. Let your light shine. You are the lamp illuminating the dark night for the bridegroom who comes. Be ready. Let the light of your faith shine. Let the fire of your hope burn, even where the shadows are long in these days.

The shadows are long in Gaza and Tel Aviv

The shadows are long in Kyiv and Moscow

The shadows are long in Washington and Austin

The shadows are long in Brownsville and Matamoros

The shadows are long on the streets of Waco, in hospital rooms and nursing homes, possibly in your home and possibly in your heart.

There are long shadows all around. Let your light shine.

Let it shine even in these days because we are in Advent time. We live between the waiting and the prayer for hastening. We live between affirmations of God's goodness in what was and the need for God to come again. In these days of the church calendar and in the world, faith is not for the weak-minded, and it's not for wimps. The world is too big for anything but truth and too small for anything but love. The world is too dangerous for anything but a strong-hearted faith.

Choose you this day whom you will serve, and to whom you trust to pray come to my assistance. Come to our assistance, O God. To Joshua's no, you can't do that; we reply, yes, we can by God's grace in Christ, and with God's help in the Spirit, we will serve the Lord and whisper in the dark: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Amen.