

I Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway
November 20, 2022*

Keeping the Fires Burning

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.

The wise and foolish bridesmaids. This story is not a text for the faint hearted. It is, as one commentator put it, ‘scary, pointed, irrevocable, and not pleasant.’¹ I remember hearing it as a child and being both intrigued -- what young girl can resist a story about a wedding? And frightened -- the bridesmaids in the story tried after all! It seems so harsh.

For Christians the end of the year comes a month early. Advent marks the beginning of our church year. With the first Sunday of Advent, November 27 this year, we turn over our calendars and begin the cycle of our Christian life once more. Advent. Christmas. Lent. Easter. Pentecost. And then November. November is not really officially on our liturgical calendar but it does have its own characteristic theme each year.

I have a favorite song lyric, that comes to mind often for me this time of year. It says, ‘every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end’.² Our liturgical life does not let us forget this truth. Endings are as central to our lives as are beginnings. And our endings, big or small are as much in God’s hands as are our beginnings. And so, in November when most of us, I know I, would rather be reflecting on Thanksgiving or other more palatable thoughts for this time of year,

¹ Anne Carter Florence, Preaching the Lesson, *GoodPreacher Journals*, 11.09.2008, goodpreacher.com

² ‘Closing Time’ by Semisonic, sung by Green Day, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmtOY4Hz6Ks>

our liturgical focus is on the end time. That ultimate ending that can send ripples of emotion through all the other endings in our lives.

The Sundays in November we hear texts like what Guy read from 1 Thessalonians. Texts meant to encourage. No focus on the 'Left Behinds' here! True, to our ears the details may be confusing or even troubling but the bottom line, the message, is clear. To the Christians in Thessalonica, fearful of the end of time Paul writes: "The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18) As strange as all the details sound to our ears, encouragement in the faith in the face of fear and uncertainty is the clear message here.

And then we read also, these November Sundays, cautionary stories that come to us from the mouth of Jesus in the gospels, meant to help us prepare for what is surely to come.

Today's reading is a story about wise and foolish bridesmaids, told to guide our steps. The bottom line here could not be more clear: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

If that were all there was to this story, we could *maybe* take it in. 2000 years of history since Jesus' first coming has taught us this much. We surely do *not* know when the end of time will come and when Jesus, often seen as the bridegroom in this story, will come again. And we *do* know that we must live our lives always with eyes and hearts open for Christ coming among us. Awake to Christ's presence among us *now*.

Another famous end time story that occurs just a few verses later in Matthew, the story of the sheep and the goats, reminds us of this as well. Jesus here says, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:35, 36, 40) We do not know the day or the hour. We *do* know our call in the mean time. Be ready with our whole being.

The part of this story, however, that caught me up as a little girl and continues to make me shy away from this text today is the unyielding Lord. The bridesmaids tried! Though maybe not the bottom line, this aspect of the story has not gone unnoticed either through the years. This text can leave scars. I understand God's justice, but this? It just does not fit with Jesus' overall message of forgiveness and grace. What is this story teaching?

As I wrestled with these words this week I read an article that brought some new perspectives to me on this text.³ I want to share it with you.

In this story the difference between a wise and a foolish bridesmaid was a flask of oil carried along, or not, when it was time to wait for the coming bridegroom. That's all we know. There is no mention of possible barrels of oil back home or whether the wise or foolish maids may have brought with them all that they had.

The only distinguishing factor here is that when it came time to wait, some had what they needed and some had nothing to keep them going. When your lamp goes out you may have gallons of oil sitting somewhere else but it won't do you any good unless it is right there with you.

So, what is it that replenishes your oil? We are called to be 'the light of the world'. But, like the candles that are oil filled tapers, when there is no oil, no light can shine.

How is it that we replenish our oil? Where do you find God, and how can you make sure you get enough of that oil for your lamp, so that God can fill you up again? It is like that safety speech on the airplanes. "In the event of an emergency, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling; however, be sure to secure your own oxygen masks first before assisting others." What is it that you do to nurture your faith, to make sure you have ears ready to hear and eyes ready to see Christ when he comes? To be the caring and nurturing sheep in the story that comes a few verses later in Matthew.

Here is where the urgency of this story comes in. This story makes clear that this is not really negotiable. You have to do it. There are some things you cannot borrow from any one else. The bridesmaids learned that.

³ Anne Carter Florence, Preaching the Lesson, *GoodPreacher Journals*, 11.09.2008, goodpreacher.com

Others may be able to point you in a good direction but **you must refill**. You can borrow your friend's homework but not the hours they put in studying for the test. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for our selves, reserves that no one else can build up for us. We have to figure out what fills us up spiritually; prayer maybe, meditation, study or fellowship and community, or service. Or some combination of all of the above. And then make sure we have some to carry with us, every minute of every day, because that is how often we will need it.

I had one of those 'ahah' God moments in relation to this idea last week. Last Tuesday night we had our monthly Session meeting. These meetings always begin with a brief time of devotion. I asked Irene to lead the devotion this month because it was her first time back after her sabbatical and I figured people would enjoy hearing from her. She shared that one of the things she focused on during her time away was the importance of keeping oneself healthy and whole in order to be able to do the work we are called to do. How she explored what that looks like for her. The idea that our own needs have value. She did not talk about oil in lamps but that is what I heard. Doing the things we need to do to keep our lights burning is not optional. It is essential.

Bridesmaids, in most weddings at least, are the closest of friends to the bride and the groom, often family. The bonds of love are deep and strong. Whether those precious bridesmaids are wise or foolish does not matter.

If we, followers of Christ, are the bridesmaids in this story then maybe the point here is not to scare us all. This is a wedding after all! A joyous occasion. We are God's beloved here. We don't fill our flasks because we are afraid we will get locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. Rather, we take time to stop at the filling stations, whatever they may be for us, fill our flask, our hearts, our minds our souls and carry that with us, because we cannot wait to meet the bridegroom. We fill out of joy and out of love, out of our desire to meet Jesus when he comes. Which he does and will.