

Flame On or Flame Out?

Matt. 25:1-13

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In one of my favorite *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoons, Calvin, the tow-headed, mischievous little boy walks into the room wearing a large space helmet, a long superhero cape, carrying a flashlight in one hand and a baseball bat in the other. His mom takes a look at his get-up and says, "So, what's up today?" Calvin replies, "Nothing so far." "So far?" she asks. "Well you never know," he says. "Something could happen today." As he leaves his mom says, "I need a suit like that!"

Calvin was living out the time-tested axiom to "be prepared." This is more than just a Boy Scout motto or insurance company slogan. As we see in today's passage, "be prepared" is a command from Jesus himself. But here's what I want to know: Prepared for what? If you ask Calvin, he seems like he's prepared for just about anything, from a blackout to a grand slam to a moon landing. But what is Jesus telling us we are supposed to be prepared for? And are we?

Normally I'd encourage us to look to scripture for answers, but I'm not sure today's passage is going to do much for us. Jesus' exhortation to be prepared comes at the end of the parable about the ten bridesmaids, but this story is so far removed from our understanding and experience of weddings that it verges on the edge of being unhelpful.

Here's what Jesus tells us. The kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids waiting for the groom to arrive for a wedding, which is in line with the customary traditions of the day. In today's world weddings have to compete with all sorts of other events vying for attention and attendance: college football games, Keenland outings, birthday parties, and so on. But in Jesus' time, the world stopped for a wedding. It was a week-long celebration that often involved the whole town. It started with the arrival of the groom, who would come to the bride's house for the ceremony, then take her back to his house where the wedding banquet would continue. One of the responsibilities of the bridesmaids was to watch for and announce the arrival of the groom.

Jesus tells us at the outset of this story that five of these bridesmaids are foolish and five are wise. I checked several different translations to see how these descriptions were rendered. The wise bridesmaids were also called sensible or prudent. But the foolish were just called foolish. They weren't call bad or sinful or unwelcomed. Just foolish.

Why were the five called foolish? They showed up on time, they initially had oil in their lamp, they eventually came to the wedding banquet. In addition, Jesus tells us that all 10 bridesmaids became drowsy and fell asleep, not just the five foolish ones. So then why are the foolish ones called foolish? It all comes down to being prepared. Jesus ends this passage with the admonition to "keep awake," but that's a misleading translation. A better way to say it is "keep watch" or "be prepared." For all the things the foolish girls did right, what they didn't do was plan ahead. Because, as Calvin so astutely reminds us, you just never know.

This story only appears this way in Matthew's gospel, which can shed some light on its meaning for us. Matthew was writing his gospel primarily for Jews, as a way to help them understand that Jesus was the Messiah that had been promised in the Hebrew prophecies. That's why he quotes so heavily from the Hebrew scriptures when he talks about Jesus' birth. Now notice that today's story takes place in Ch. 25, which is just one chapter away from the events of the Last Supper and Jesus' arrest. The end is near, so Matthew's efforts to convince non-believing Jews become more urgent.

That might help explain the harshness of this parable. When it comes to the kingdom of God, Matthew had no qualms about drawing very distinct lines designating who was in and who was out. Just a few verses later Matthew will talk about separating the sheep from the goats and saying to one group, "Welcome to the kingdom" and the other group "Too bad for you." In essence, this parable does the same thing. Those that are prepared are in. Those that procrastinate and lollygag and dilly-dally...you're out.

As a professional dilly-dallyer, that worries me a bit. I don't want to miss my chance at heaven because I waited around too long. But I also have some problems accepting the fact that the door to heaven ever gets closed. There's a finality to this parable that I have trouble accepting, based on my understanding and experience of a loving, patient, forgiving God. I like to believe I follow the God who throws open wide his arms to receive his ill-prepared Prodigal Son, a story that's in Luke but not in Matthew.

I think I also bristle at the ultimatum presented here because I've heard it misused so many times. I don't believe Jesus wants us to come to him out of fear, but I've heard plenty of "What if you die tomorrow?" sermons. I'd rather spend my time focusing on what I'm going to do for God if I LIVE tomorrow and let God sort out the other part. So this parable and I are still wrestling with each other over the meaning of the closed door.

But that doesn't discount the truth that it holds for me or the lesson I can learn, because the commandment to "be prepared" still has value. We still need oil in our lamps, which I take to be a symbol for faith, for the spiritual reserves we draw upon during tough times. What the parable wants us to be prepared for is the Second Coming of Christ. When Matthew wrote his gospel, the popular belief was that Jesus' return was imminent, so this exhortation carried with it a sense of urgency. Be prepared!

But 2000 years of waiting has a way of dulling the edges of that urgency. While we may give lip service to the Second Coming, in our hearts do we truly believe it's going to happen? Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know about you, but the delay in Jesus' return coupled with extremist predictions about the End Times has left me a bit calloused. But the danger is that such thinking can lead to complacency and passivity and before you know it, you've run out of oil when you most need it.

I don't know when Jesus is coming again. No one knows the day or the hour. But we also don't know the day or hour of the next event that will force us to rely on our faith to get through. Who knows when the next surgery, the next job challenge, the next family crisis will be? But we can be sure they are coming, just as we are promised Jesus is coming. And during such moments, we need a light that will see us through.

At the risk of exposing my supreme geekiness to you, I'm going to use an illustration from a comic book. In the Fantastic Four comic series, one of the characters is Johnny Storm, better known as the Human Torch. Like the rest of the Fantastic Four, the Human Torch gained his powers on a spacecraft bombarded by cosmic rays. With his powers he can engulf his entire body in flames, is able to fly, and can control any nearby fire by sheer force of will. To activate his powers, the Torch shouts "Flame on!" which became his catchphrase.

Ah, if only it were that easy! If only the bridesmaids could have shouted a catchy phrase and refilled their flasks with oil. If only we could recite an incantation or proclaim some pithy prayer and suddenly have our faith tank refilled. But the reality is that if we don't pay careful attention to our spiritual reserves, when we need it the most our light is more likely to flame out than flame on.

You see, the stark reality is that no one can make it on another person's oil. We might be tempted to chastise the wise bridesmaids for not being willing to share their oil. But we can make it through life on borrowed faith. There are certain things that can't be obtained at the last minute.

At my church in Illinois I had a call one day from a frantic parent. Her 11-year-old son had been listening to music that she thought was inappropriate, and when she tried to take it from him, he cussed at her and stormed out of the house. When she called me she was driving in the car to pick him up from a friend's house and wanted to bring him to me so I could talk to him. Geez, thanks a lot, lady! I wanted to say, "I can't do in 11 minutes what you've neglected to do for 11 years." In other words, if we continue neglecting our spiritual life and development, I'm afraid that when we need a flame to help light the darkness we may not find enough there to make even a spark.

But if we keep buying oil, week after week, year after year, we'll find that we've built up a reserve that will last us through even the longest, darkest periods of waiting. Regardless of when Jesus is coming, we know for a fact that tomorrow is coming. And with Calvin, we can all say truthfully, "You never know." We need to have strength and courage for tomorrow, and we don't get that at the last minute, as if we're cramming for a final exam. No, that strength and courage comes from our commitment to filling our lamps with the oil that comes from prayer, reading Scripture, worship, giving, service. Each day we have the opportunity to add oil to our lamps. Every choice we make, every interaction with another person is a opportunity to add to our reserves. Each time we make a choice to live as followers of Jesus first, to put our faith at the front of our lives, another drop of oil goes into the lamp.

I don't believe we choose to let our lights burn out. I believe, like the 10 bridesmaids, we all start out with oil in our lamps. But it's up to us to be intentional about keeping them filled. We make like to think we know what's going to happen, but really, does any of us know? We may want to live planned lives, but we're better off living prepared lives. Are we prepared? Don't flame out. Flame on!