

Let Me Tell You A Story sermon series
The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids
Matt. 25:1-13
July 22, 2018

In one of my favorite *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoons, Calvin walks into the room wearing – picture this in your mind – a large space helmet, a long superhero cape, carrying a flashlight in one hand and a baseball bat in the other. His mom looks 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 baseball game to a moon landing. But what is Jesus telling us we are supposed to be prepared for?

I want to start by saying this parable is hard. As one commentator says, it’s odd, it’s ominous, and it’s archaic. So, we’ve got some work to do this morning. But first, let’s make sure we’re all on the same page in understanding what’s going on. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids waiting for the groom to arrive for a wedding, who is delayed in coming. While waiting, all ten fall asleep. When they awaken to the news that the groom is coming, five of them have lamps that went out, while the others’ are still burning because they brought enough oil. When the five foolish bridesmaids ask the five wise ones to borrow oil, they are told there’s not enough, so the foolish ones have to go in search of more oil. While they are gone, the groom arrives and invites the five wise bridesmaids into the party. When the foolish return with oil and knock on the door, the groom says he doesn’t know them and shuts the door on them. And everybody lives uncomfortably ever after.

Usually, when we read one of Jesus’ parables, we’re invited to see ourselves in it, or at least who Jesus is calling us to be. For example, we should strive to be the good Samaritan who stops to help someone, the prodigal son who turns around and comes back home, the father who welcomes his wayward child with open arms. So, who are we supposed to be in this parable? Because, to be honest, I’m having trouble finding anyone to whom I want to relate.

I don’t want to be the foolish bridesmaids, who aren’t prepared and miss the arrival of the groom. I don’t want to be the wise bridesmaids, because they refuse to share their oil with their friends. And I don’t want to be the groom, because he shows up late and shuts out five of his friends from the party. Maybe I could be the wedding cake!

To better understand the harshness of this parable, we need to situate it in the context of Matthew’s gospel. It occurs in chapter 25, and there are only 28 chapters in Matthew, so we know we’re close to the end. This parable is sandwiched in between two others that also emphasize preparation for the master’s return. In a sense, Jesus is giving his followers a final exam before his crucifixion. He’s telling them he’s going to come again, and this time, they better be ready. Either be prepared or be left behind.

A few weeks ago when I was on vacation, I worshipped at East Second Street Christian Church, not knowing that it was the celebration of Rev. Don Gillett’s 19th year at East Second Street, so he wasn’t preaching. When I walked in, one of the ushers shook my hand and asked, “Oh, are you our guest preacher today?” You know those anxiety dreams you have the night before something big like, say, a sermon, when you dream that you get to church and you’ve

completely forgotten that you were supposed to preach? Well, dreams do come true! Thankfully, I was NOT the guest preacher that morning, but for a moment, I was afraid I had shown up not prepared.

Jesus tells us to keep awake, to be prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom, which translates to the second coming of Jesus. That warning carried a lot of power for the first decade or so after the crucifixion. But Matthew is writing at least 30 years after that, so the urgency to be prepared has lost its edge. In the parable, Jesus notes the bridegroom has been delayed, but that shouldn't keep us from waiting expectantly and being prepared, because something could happen today. And yet, after only 30 years, Jesus' followers were getting a bit drowsy waiting for him.

So, how are we doing 2000 years later? Do we still feel the expectation that Jesus could come at any time? To be honest, I think we have stopped waiting. We've grown accustomed to life the way it is, so this parable doesn't carry much weight for us. Every year before Christmas we have a season of waiting called Advent, when we live out the expectancy of the birth of the Christ child, which is a portent of the arrival of Jesus a second time. But how well does that message get through the jingling bells and pretty packaging of the season? We've stopped waiting. Now, if Jesus had been born in August we could have avoided competing with Christmas. What does it mean to be prepared for something when you're not sure it's even going to happen? Does this parable have anything to say to us?

This story is a great reminder that, even when a story in the Bible seems to have lost its applicability, there is still truth there to be heeded. I will admit there are parts of this parable that I fundamentally disagree with, and I have to wrestle with that, and that's OK. I don't accept a picture of Jesus that permanently closes the door on anyone. That's not the God I worship. I know Jesus was trying to make a point about being prepared, but the foolish bridesmaids don't just stand around in the dark, they make an effort to get more oil. I don't like the fact that the wise bridesmaids are rewarded and yet refuse to share their abundance. I don't see myself in this parable.

Or do I? What I also have to admit is that I've been the wise bridesmaid that refused to share the abundance I have. I've been the groom who has shut people out of my life because they didn't act like I thought they should. And I've been the foolish bridesmaid who wasn't prepared to act when Jesus showed up in my life. I may not believe in being prepared for a second coming, but that doesn't mean I still shouldn't be prepared, because something may happen today, Jesus may show up, and I don't want to miss it.

That's the truth I take away from this story today. The warning to keep awake may feel like it no longer applies to a literal second coming, but it does still apply to the other ways Jesus shows up in our lives. Maybe the message today, 2000 years later after it was first shared, is not so much that we should be waiting expectantly for Jesus to arrive again, but instead that we should keep awake for the ways that Jesus shows up in our waiting. Because, as we all know, it's hard to wait.

Today in worship we welcome the Mlombi family, who we have the honor of serving as they establish their new home here in Lexington after spending – let this sink in – 22 years in a refugee camp. Can you imagine? I hope that gives us all some perspective. Personally, I get impatient when the line at Panera is too long. Some of us had to go without power this weekend after violent storms ripped through the area. And some of us spent 22 years in a refugee camp. Waiting can be really, really hard.

And yet, Jesus shows up in the midst of our waiting. In interpreting this scripture for myself, I choose to balance the disturbing picture of the groom who shuts the door with the words of Jesus from Matthew 7: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

So our responsibility is to keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. Because, as we all know, there will be times in our lives when the waiting gets tough, and our lights run low, and the flame of hope inside of us flickers and dims. And when that happens, we need to have a reserve of oil from which to draw. We can be prepared by continuing to seek Jesus in our lives so that our spiritual reserves don't run out.

I believe there are two kinds of people in this world: those who panic when their gas gauge gets close to ½ full, and those who are convinced that they can still squeeze a few more miles out of the tank, even when the needle dips below the E. I'm definitely the second kind. I've coasted into more than one gas stations as my car sputtered to a stop. Now, we have display systems that tell you exactly how many miles you have left, which frankly takes all the adventure out of it.

So, where is your needle today? Maybe you just filled up and you've got all the spiritual fuel you need. Maybe you're half full, but you've got enough to keep you going. Maybe you're on E, sputtering into worship today, running on fumes and hoping to restore your reserves. Wherever your needle is, the door is open to you and the table is set. As Paul tells us in Philippians, Jesus Christ has emptied himself for us, pouring himself out so that we may be filled with the hope and grace that he offers us. Even in our times of intense waiting, Christ is there, abiding with us, reminding us that nothing can separate us from God's love – not long lines, not power outages, not refugee camps.

Today, my prayer is that we leave this place with our needs on F, filled with the knowledge that Christ is not delayed, but is with us even now. And I pray that we leave this place looking for opportunities to share the abundance we have been given with those whose flames are flickering. Jesus says that we are the light of the world, called to shine in the dark places around us, illuminating and enlightening, bringing the hope of Christ to a weary world. Here is the oil we need. Here is the bridegroom for whom we wait.

Will there be a literal second coming of Jesus? I honestly don't know. I hope so, but I also recognize that Jesus has already come to us in other ways – through the words of scripture, through the kindness of friends, through the bread and the cup. And we are invited simply to be still, to be refilled, to receive the gifts that Christ offers. Because, when we leave this place, well, you never know. Something could happen today. And when it does – because we know it will, either today or another day – let's remember that Christ will be there with us.