

November 12, 2023  
Year A Proper 27  
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25  
Psalm 78:1-7  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Matthew 25:1-13

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

When we first hear today's parable, the moral of the story sounds like something any Boy Scout might have told us: Be prepared. Plan ahead. Bring enough oil. Keep extra batteries on hand. Keep matches or a lighter in the sacristy so you can light the altar candles. Be prepared.

But, as always with Jesus's stories, there's more to it than that. It's not just, "Be prepared," but "Be prepared to wait." And not even just, "Be prepared to wait," but "Be prepared to wait for the *Lord*."

How are you at waiting?

It can be hard to wait. How often have you heard, "Your call is important to us. Please continue to hold for the next available operator." Or "Take a number and have a seat until you are called." People who study these things say that in North America, as opposed to other places in the world, we tend to see time as our own individual possession *and* our scarcest resource. If time is passing and we're not producing something, we feel like we're wasting time. We are afraid of pauses, of unexpected interruptions to our plans, and boredom. People can tell us that some things just take time, that there are things you can't rush, or that a caterpillar needs time in its cocoon to become a butterfly, and we can nod. Sure. That's nice.

We're not always good at waiting.

The parable Jesus tells is about a wedding feast and waiting. In Jesus' day, a wedding ceremony would usually be held in the bride's family home. The wedding feast afterward would be held in the groom's family home and would start at night after the wedding ceremony—and the feast and celebrations lasted about a week, not just one night. When the feast was set to begin, the groom picked up his brand-new wife at her home, and then they would walk together to the wedding banquet with the bridesmaids, who had one job: to accompany the bride and groom to the banquet, holding lamps to light the way for them. And remember, in those days, there were no streetlights, no electricity. So the bridesmaids weren't just decorative, or there for moral support; their function was necessary to get the group safely to the feast.

Except, in the parable, only half of the bridesmaids were prepared to wait for the bridegroom. The other five weren't. So, when the moment comes, *they* are off in the dark trying, somehow, to get a refill for their lamps. Eventually, they do, but by the time they arrive at the feast, the party has started, the door has been locked, and they are locked out.

In Church tradition and biblical language, the bridegroom is a symbol of Christ, and the bridegroom's arrival, is a symbol of the Second Coming of Christ, when he will bring the faithful to the heavenly banquet, a great feast, that will last not just a week, but for all eternity.

We're still waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. Whether we're waiting for the Second Coming of the Lord, or waiting to meet our Lord when we die, we are still waiting.

We don't like waiting, but God promises us blessings even as we wait. God says in Isaiah 40:31, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Even though it might seem like it, waiting is not doing nothing, and having to wait for the Lord doesn't mean that the Lord is doing nothing. We can wait, trusting that God is *always* doing something. God is not helping another customer while we languish in line. God is always at work, as we hear in Morning Prayer, "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. *Whose power, working in us!* We get to participate in what God is already doing now.

Again, waiting doesn't mean inactivity. Having oil at the ready, that is, being prepared spiritually, comes from doing what we're told to do, being obedient to God, being formed by God's power at work in us. So, how *do* we keep this metaphorical oil on hand? We can be filled with this oil through practices and disciplines that are the same for all of us—prayer, reading the Scriptures, sharing fellowship and worship with other Christians, caring for people and the planet. And for most of us it's also a specialty oil blend: spiritual renewal can be spending time with family; looking at nature's beauty; listening to or making music; knitting; yoga; gardening, writing; baking; walking. The "oil" of spiritual renewal is using what God gives us to keep us going, to recharge, to stay connected with God and God's love.

And do you see why the wise bridesmaids can't just share their oil? Yes, sharing is a Christian virtue, but some things just don't work that way. Let's say your friend has a marvelous marriage. There's no way to borrow some of that. Another friend has a vibrant and sustaining prayer life. Yes, she can pray for you, but she can't take your place in a relationship with God. You can be influenced or inspired by someone else's peace of mind and confident trust in the Lord, but they can't just give you some of theirs. We have to get oil for ourselves.

And yes, as much as we don't like it, time does run out. You can't say forever, "Someday I'll spend time with my children, or my spouse." "Someday I'll get back to church, back to reading the Bible, back to praying." "Someday I'll make that phone call, write that letter, or make that donation." Because if we wait for someday, someday someone will shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" And we won't be ready. There is such a thing as too little, too late. We don't like it, but there it is.

But here is the good news: we are still here. We are hearing this parable, and it is not too late. And remember, this is a *party* that Jesus wants to take us to. He's preparing a great feast for us. Whether it's the great banquet feast of heaven, or the smaller celebrations of spending time with our Lord all along the journey here, we don't want to miss it. And more good news: Jesus is not just the thrower of the party. He's not just the bridegroom. He's also the oil dealer, ready to fill your lamp. Just ask. For yourself. Amen.

The Rev. Melanie Lewis  
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The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter