

Matthew 25:1-13

November 12, 2017 The Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Disciplines of Readiness

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Let me be the first to say that this parable is neither clear nor easy. My friend Jill Duffield wrote this week:

Little about this parable resonates in our post-modern ears. We don't use oil lamps. We rarely consider the Second Coming. No one I know concerns themselves with THE FINAL JUDGMENT. Bridesmaids' duties do not include sitting around waiting for the "bridegroom" to return to his father's house with his new wife. All of this watchfulness and wakefulness and alertness feels unnecessary or just plain weird. We have security systems, surveillance cameras and cell phones to alert us, no need to keep our lamps trimmed and burning. If something major happens someone will text, tweet, post or call.

Some years ago I preached a sermon during Advent for a Presbyterian church in Virginia founded in 1746. The sermon focused on the Advent of Jesus Christ which was the subject of the text for the day – not the first coming of the Baby which everyone was eager to celebrate – but the **future coming** of the child who grew to be a man who challenged the rulers of this world, was crucified and is now raised as ruler of creation. It is this crucified, raised, exalted One whose Advent we wait in anticipation of the fulfillment of all God's promises. All in all, nothing unusual for the season, I thought.

When the service was over, a woman, whose Virginia roots stretched all the way back the founding of that congregation, said, "In all the years that I have been here, I've never heard a sermon on the second coming." (I couldn't tell if this was a good thing or a bad thing. But I suspected it was not good.) I replied, "Well, I'm sorry this has come to you as a shock this morning. But it's better that it comes now rather than later, don't you think?"

Then we had a lively conversation about what all this might mean for the living of our days **now** in anticipation of a future yet to be disclosed. As best I could tell she never worried about it again; if she did she didn't mention it. She died a few years ago.

So what are we to do with this parable? On many subjects in the Bible, I am content to follow the advice of Iris Dement, the folk singer from Arkansas, who sings with deep twang, "*I just let the mystery be.*" There are some things that are not easily comprehended, nor should they be reduced to a portion that fits comfortably into my life and managed to my own liking. The Advent of God is one of them.

The fact that I can't fully comprehend something this large –the coming of God - does not mean I must dismiss it, as if the capacity of my comprehension were the final measure of

what is true or not. Accepting a mystery of faith as being true and worthy of consideration is, in part, acknowledging that neither you nor I are the arbiters of truth.

God is and God has spoken definitively in Jesus, who came among us filled with grace and truth, whose coming we await with hope and wonder. With Iris Dement, I am willing to sit with this mystery, with an open mind and open heart, filled with vibrant hope.

Honestly, I don't need to figure it all out.

In the 25th chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells two parables about the second coming, and a third with a vision of the coming of the Son of Man when the sheep are separated from the goats. Each is startling; each carries warnings about the impending day of God's judgment; each is difficult.

The question before us today is similar to the question before the Christian community that originally heard this parable, with its striking images of bridesmaids and a bridegroom whose delay revealed the true character of everyone. How shall we who are the followers of Christ live *now*, wide-awake, yearning for what is yet to come?

As odd as it is to our ears, ***Matthew refuses to drop the tension of the already but not yet time.*** Instead this parable urges those who belong to Christ to be **alert** and **prepared**, always out the look out for God's presence. Unprepared, absent-minded we miss everything including the often-elusive presence of God among us. Read in this way, ***this is a parable of mindfulness and waiting for God to appear.***

Waiting is a discipline of readiness about which our culture has nothing to teach us. Everything is immediate and fast. A culture that encourages instant self-gratification is one that has lost the capacity to wait. We are experiencing the consequences of that incapacity – you might call it, **the final judgment.**

Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Someone once said, *"it doesn't take a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."* Nor does it take a preacher to say we are in serious time in this country and throughout the world. A great day of free-floating anger and fear has created a toxic mix. The cost of leadership appears to be too high a price for many of our elected officials. At the very moment when we must come together, the country is enmeshed in familiar political soap operas and deep divisions. The faces of the fallen continue to haunt us, wounded warriors slowly come home, often in trauma in need of healing. Add guns to the mix and we are deep trouble.

How then shall we live mindfully in this interim time? To be honest, I don't find the parable particularly helpful with the suggestion that the wise not to share the precious oil with the foolish. Perhaps there is a point to that but I'm aware of my own failures enough

to hope the wise will share whatever they have with the rest of us. To the extent I have any wisdom at all, I want to be certain everyone has enough oil in their lamps to see the coming of God any way possible. What we need, it seems to me, is a lot more sharing of whatever will help us be mindful of the pain of others, a lot more sharing of the precious oil of faith, hope and love – all of which is in short supply. I less interested in judging the foolish ones who fall asleep – heaven knows I've been among them - and more interested in finding ways we can all stay awake. It is foolish to sleep through our lives – that much seems obvious. What is not so obvious is how to be wise – discerning the times in a mindful way, alert to God's presence.

In this crazy, dangerous interim time, when fear abounds and divisions grow deeper, the call of the whole Church remains the same. Walking in the way of Jesus, proclaiming the *good news* of God's love for all people without regard to economic status, sexual orientation, power or privilege, caring for creation and standing by the poor; being a voice for the voiceless, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless and visiting those in prisons with gospel hope. This remains our calling and will continue until the end, about which we know neither the day nor the hour.

So, people of God, let us help one another be alert. Keeps your lamps lit and your wicks trimmed; after all we have work to do; our Lord is coming.

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

Amen.