

“Trimmed and Burning”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 25:1-13
March 31, 2019 - Fourth Sunday in Lent

Last Sunday we lined up some folks down here in front of the communion table in order to create a visual timeline so we could put the Gospel reading into context. We said that Matthew wrote in about the year 80, looking back at the destruction of Jerusalem a decade earlier as he told the story of Jesus, whose crucifixion occurred about forty years before that.

As Matthew’s Gospel approaches its final chapter, and as Jesus draws closer to the cross, we find Jesus offering parables and sayings about the mysterious end times. In the midst of all that, the disciples want to know more. They ask for some insider tips in the chapter before this morning’s text. They want to know when the wild signs of the end of the age will happen. They want to be sure to be ready.

And, back to our timeline, we note that in fifty years, many who were waiting had died and many who were young had grown old. The first generation of Jesus-followers likely believed that he would return in their lifetime. As Matthew writes, there had already been a delay. And we imagine their might have been questions about the delay and then other questions that a fledgling community that had seen destruction needed to confront.

It’s two days since the entry into Jerusalem and it’s two days until Jesus is arrested. The tension is continuing to rise. The disciples sit on the Mount of Olives and look at the holy city and the temple and this is what Jesus says to them:

[Jesus said:] “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

There are precisely three things I remember about the wedding of my distant cousin Kim:

1) There was an endless supply of shrimp cocktail at the reception and I had never been so happy.

2) When the bride and groom knelt before the priest to receive Holy Communion, the congregation gasped. On the soles of the groom's shoes were words written in capital letters with masking tape. Our family did not appreciate the joke, though I think Matthew might have. From left to right his shoes read: "THE END."

3) The wedding started a half hour late because the bus carrying fifty of the groom's Massachusetts relatives got lost on the Staten Island Expressway.

In the world of First Century Judaism, wedding procedures were a bit different from what we're used to. There were two stages: first the agreement between the families. Then the groom would go fetch the bride for the celebration. His arrival would depend on travel conditions and distance and whatever else might cause a delay. So in this parable, we've got bridesmaids awaiting his appearance, ready to party, taking their lamps to line the road so that when the groom arrived, he would be greeted and led to his bride.¹

This groom will arrive at night, it seems, and we must remember what night looked like in the ancient world. Namely: really, really dark and full of terrors. Thus, the lamps. Oil lamps, like this one here. Like the candles in our sanctuary.

Sometimes people who have been worshipping here a long time are surprised to discover that these candles are all oil-fueled. But those who fill them know all too well how if the wicks stick out too far, the flames will be too big, and possibly smoky, and we'll burn through the oil in no time. And if one of these candles sputters out during worship, we know one of us dropped the ball and that there's nothing we can do but stare at the sad candle for the rest of the service. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

These bridesmaids all were invited. And they all showed up. But the groom was delayed, and while they all fell asleep, we know that half were wise and half were foolish and that comes to light when the guy is getting close at midnight and the bridesmaids scurry to trim their lamps and go meet him. The foolish ones discover that their lamps are going out. They panic and turn to the wise and ask for help. The wise bridesmaids realize that if they offer up their oil, everyone's lamp will go out. So they suggest that perhaps the foolish ones go see if the 24-hour Circle K has some lamp oil.

We could get stuck here wondering why Jesus would tell a story in which those he labels as "wise" are not sharing. It doesn't feel very Jesus-y.

It does, however, remind me of a familiar feeling. I wish I had a nickel for every time I've wanted to shout at someone, "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part!" This phrase becomes embedded in the human brain the second you are in any sort of supervisory role, teach students, or become a parent.

My mom still tells of me being a sixth-grader and announcing to her at 9:30 p.m., "I don't

¹ Rev. Marci Auld Glass, "Oil Crisis" at <https://marciglass.com/2008/10/28/oil-crisis/>

have clean gym clothes for tomorrow!” and her response: “I’m going to bed. Don’t forget to clean the lint trap.”

For all we know these foolish bridesmaids have plenty of oil at home. They may have barrels labeled “Wedding Oil - Do Not Touch” in their bedrooms. Their families may work for Big Lamp Oil. But they have failed to be prepared. They were prepared for the groom. But they were not ready for his delay. They weren’t ready for a bump in the road. They weren’t ready for a surprise. They weren’t ready to have their expectations messed with.

They didn’t plan for the long haul, and now they’re in trouble. And it’s true that their fellow bridesmaids don’t share, but it’s time for the weekly reminder that this is a parable, not a detailed description of God’s will. Rather, it’s a comparison meant to rattle us a bit and leave us asking questions. This one isn’t about sharing, it’s about preparation.

Returning from their search, the foolish bridesmaids show up for the banquet, which has started without them. It’s something like 3 a.m. and this party is rocking and they knock on the door and ask to come in. But the groom has not met them. They weren’t there with lamplight when he arrived. They were off in the night, in search of oil. To the groom, they are wedding crashers.

There is a call here to be ready to wait deep into the night. Show up, bring rations, and don’t get caught without what you need. Whether the oil for us is faith or hope or whatever we determine we will need to encounter Christ in our life, we are to carry enough with us to last longer than we expect.

I’m honestly not sure what to make of that in our context. But I do have questions.

What would have happened if the foolish bridesmaids had just stuck it out? What if they had waited with the others, in the dark, deciding that their presence was more important than being the ones with working lamps? What if they had offered what remaining oil they did have to the wise ones, and then relied on the light of five lamps to carry their little community through the night?

There are weeks, and months, and years when we need to borrow some lamplight. There are weeks and months and years when we just walk in the inky shadows. And there are times when we seem to have a light burning so brightly that we must be one of the wise. We’re certain of it. We’re mostly sure of it. We’re probably among the wise. We’re just going to check our satchel here to confirm we have the flask of oil. We think the wick is okay. The wick is definitely not okay. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

Here we sit, so far from the Matthew timeline. Hundreds of generations have come and gone, passing the lamp to the next, and some oil to boot, with questions and waiting and a desire to be prepared for God to do something with this mess. We’re looking to be a part of a big celebration. Something so much bigger than ourselves. And it’s Lent and we’re looking inside ourselves to find that connection to something bigger.

On the way to the cross and the tomb, do we have what we need? Are we prepared to do what will be asked of us? Can we wait on God if it means reckoning with the night? When it becomes clearer what we are to do and where we are to go, will we be found with lamplight? Or will we be off in search of fuel to purchase?

I wonder if you can remember a time when you were minding your own business — perhaps not waiting, so much as thinking, “What am I even doing here?” — when you were found by someone who needed you to be right where you were, with exactly what you had, being exactly who you are.

I found myself in a hospital waiting room once, alone, staring at my phone, thinking, “I probably could have left to go buy a cup of coffee, or even left to go back to my office and come back later. Why did I decide to stay here while the family doesn’t need me? What am I doing?”

And then a family member who had just arrived spotted me and approached and immediately started crying. I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I stood up and they hugged me and wept and mumbled, “You’re here.” And it was crystal clear that “you’re here” meant “the church... our family...the people who love us...”

I have heard these stories from you. Of being caught unexpectedly by someone who needed your compassion or your hand to hold or your ear to bend. It’s startling when this happens.

You know neither the day nor the hour. Stay awake.
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. Amen.