

## Are You Prepared?

By: Meagan McLaughlin

November 8, 2020. Pastor Meagan's sermon today is on Jesus' Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, and being prepared in the midst of so many long hauls.

Readings: [Amos 5:18-24](#), [Matthew 25:1-13](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

I am a planner. I always have been, since birth. As a kid, I loved to read Nancy Drew mystery books, and when I read the *Tale of the Twister*, it offered a list of things to include in an “emergency preparedness kit” and I was all over it. I assembled the most complete backpack of supplies I could manage at the age of 9 — water, flashlight, batteries, granola bars, duct tape, even toothpaste. My brothers got a lot of mileage teasing me when I insisted on bringing the kit on a boat ride one day — until the lights on the boat went out, after dark. And my kit, if you recall, included a flashlight, which we were able to use to aid our way home. I have rarely felt more vindicated in my passion for preparing than in that moment.

This desire to plan ahead has followed me into adulthood, and when we were heading out to be with my mother-in-law in her final days in a Wisconsin hospital and weren't sure how long we would be gone, I made a list of over 30 things to do before we left so we would be ready for an extended absence. And, I got them done in a day!

Part of me, when I read today's gospel about preparing for God's coming, immediately wants to get out a piece of paper and pen — or maybe the task list on my phone — and begin making my checklist of things to do. Fellow planners back me up on this: isn't that what Jesus is telling us? To be prepared? To get everything ready, so that we aren't taken by surprise when God shows up?

In spite of the passion I have for planning ahead and preparing, I have to admit that I find Jesus' parable, of the wise people who planned ahead and had a good stock of oil for their lamps, and the foolish people who didn't have enough oil, a little disturbing. After all, no matter how well we prepare, we may never be fully ready for what actually happens. I don't think any of us felt prepared for a pandemic — I certainly didn't, and still don't, although it's not from lack of trying.

This story of the unprepared, foolish people who miss their opportunity to be with the bridegroom definitely triggers anxiety, and assuming that Jesus is the bridegroom, it leaves us with a rather unforgiving image of our God. If you have enough oil, it seems to say, you're in. If not, you're out. The poor, foolish bridesmaids live out the worst nightmare for a planner like me — having failed to plan well enough, they miss their chance, and they're left in the cold. And although the wise bridesmaids don't overtly judge the foolish ones who don't have oil, their decision not to share their oil is rather harsh. At least Matthew leaves out the often-mentioned “wailing and gnashing of teeth” that is the punishment for those who are turned away from the banquet!

As we look more closely, though, some interesting details are revealed that may help us to understand this parable perhaps a little better. For one thing, Jesus tells us that it wasn't just the foolish bridesmaids who fell asleep. They all did. None of them were awake and waiting for the bridegroom when he approached. The bridesmaids, the foolish ones, weren't any better off in that regard.

And then, there is the oil. The wise people had oil to spare, and the bridegroom had arrived. Was there really not enough to light all the lamps? Couldn't they have split the oil among them, like Martin divided his cloak? They just needed enough oil to get them back to the banquet hall, after all. It seems a little selfish not to share, when the light would benefit them all in the end.

Theologian Debi Thomas, in her blog "Journey with Jesus," offers an additional perspective on the oil situation. Perhaps, she suggests, the problem isn't so much that the foolish ones didn't have enough oil and the wise ones did but wouldn't share, but that they *all* believed that having an abundance of oil was necessary in order to be allowed into the banquet hall. They *all* thought that the bridegroom cared more about the oil than he did about them!

It is, Thomas points out, a very human thing to feel like we can't present ourselves for the banquet, or whatever challenge or opportunity is in front of us, unless we are completely prepared. The wise people, with their extra oil, probably didn't want to wait for the bridegroom to arrive. They were tired, we know, and fell asleep because it took so long for him to get there. They were probably as impatient as we were waiting for the last of those election results to come in, perhaps feeling that familiar catch of breath every time they thought they saw a glint of light in the distance the way we did when our browser recycled or we thought we saw a breaking news banner on the top of the page and thought, maybe it's finally Nevada, or Pennsylvania, or Arizona. And then we sighed and sat back again, until the next time, and the next.

No, the wise people probably didn't want to wait, but they realized that they might have to. And so, they were prepared not just for what they hoped for — the eventual coming of the bridegroom — but for what they knew might be a very long night. If they were anything like me, they probably not only had extra oil, but some food and drink and blankets as well. And so, if we set aside their selfishness for a moment, we can appreciate and learn from them the wisdom of being ready not just for what we hope for, but for the very long wait and journey that it will take to get there.

We are in the midst of so many long hauls, family of faith. The pandemic, with its treatments and eventual vaccine that we know so many people are working so hard on, but it still seems like it's taking far too long, certainly much longer than we thought it would take when we began that journey in March. The continued pain and woundedness and division of racism in our country, which people of color and allies have been living with and addressing for so many years. And people are still suffering and dying in its wake wondering, "How long must we wait before justice comes?"

The wise ones were prepared for the long haul, and we are wise too if we also prepare for the long haul. But we are foolish if we think that our preparation will make what we wait for come any faster, or make us any more acceptable to the one for whom we are waiting. The wise ones could have shared, like St. Martin did his robe, and not been loved any less. The foolish ones, had they stayed, would have been loved just as well without oil, but they didn't realize that, and they missed seeing the bridegroom because they thought they weren't ready enough as they were.

The long haul is not an easy path, is it? It is not what any of us choose. It's tiring. It can wear us down, if we aren't ready — and even if we are. And it can leave us feeling unworthy and raggedly unacceptable, even if the truth is that the bridegroom we are waiting for loves us no matter how little oil we have, or how soundly we fall asleep while we're waiting.

Because worst of all, the long haul can make us forget what we are really hoping and waiting for to begin with. We can forget that no matter how long it takes, the bridegroom is coming! All of the

prophets, and Jesus himself, remind us of this all the time. There will be a banquet. This pandemic will end. The election will be resolved. There will come a time when racism, homophobia and transphobia, poverty and injustices of all kinds will be overcome by the love of God.

And we are invited to wait and watch and participate in the reign of God as it approaches, knowing that it will come. Amos reminds the people that it's not so much about getting everything right so that we can make God's spirit come on this earth, but about recognizing that God is already here, at work in the world all around us. It's about letting God's justice roll down like water, like an ever-flowing stream. We're invited into God's reign, which is coming not someday way in the future, but is happening right now. And no matter how prepared, or unprepared, or raggedy, or tired we are, we are all invited, and known, and loved.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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