

“Wisely Prepared”  
Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18;  
Matthew 25:1-13

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We are coming towards the end of Jesus’ ministry in this particular passage. We have walked through this Gospel of Matthew and are hearing Jesus as he continues to teach. As we come to the beginning of this passage he says this is like the kingdom of God.” Somehow this story is like the kingdom of God.

When I first came to this story this week, I really wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. It’s not a story that reached out and grabbed me as I first read it through. But as it worked its way into my life this week, I began to notice things. The first thing I noticed was that it’s about these maids bringing light into the darkness. Now that’s a theme that I’ve heard somewhere before. In the beginning of Matthew 5, we hear Jesus say, “Let your light shine so that people may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.” He goes on a little later to say, “Don’t put your light under a bushel basket. Let it shine.”

As I was thinking about this idea of the maidens waiting in the dark and letting their light shine, I was thinking about how Jesus invites us to let our lights shine. I’ve been doing a lot of introspection and wonder about this time and how to shine my light in the midst of a pandemic. But it also feels like, in some ways, the church has had a light that has been a little bit under cover. We haven’t shared it as well as we might. I’m taken by the fact that it took a pandemic to put our worship online, for example, and allow the light of God to shine in that way. I wonder if there aren’t other ways we might let our light shine.

I sometimes wonder about the decline in the mainline church and whether it is in part because we haven’t let our light shine in the way it might. Perhaps we have become too isolated and not connected enough. Our national church has lots of good material and encouragement for us, and yet, it is easy to get focused day to day on what we do here. It’s easy to get focused on being here rather than in our community, letting our light shine, letting our good works be seen in a way that gives glory to God in heaven.

I do notice there that it is about doing good rather than simply what we say, so I feel like it behooves me and perhaps us to think about what it means to do good. What does it mean to do good in the midst of a pandemic?

As I think about these maidens going out with their lamps, it wasn’t because it was mid-day. It was because it was night. They went into the darkness with their lights to light the way for the bridegroom. There is something about light going into the darkness that is described here that makes me think about my own feelings about this time. It’s not only that it’s getting darker earlier and winter feels dark, but there’s a certain darkness that feels like it’s pressing in on us. There is the pandemic, with its uncertainties and anxieties. We did a lot of waiting this week for an election, wondering

what it means for us, and the anxieties and uncertainties that go with it. We are in the midst of a time where we are seeing more hurricanes and fires, and those bring up other anxieties in the sense of darkness as well.

So, we think about these maidens going into the dark with their light. Does it suggest that there are times in the kingdom of God where we will feel like we are going into the darkness with our own light to light up that darkness? I think it does. Since this is towards the end of Jesus' ministry, we know Jesus is going away. Jesus' disciples are going to feel like they are going into the dark, and they will have to bring the light and light the way.

I know that I'm pretty much used to life clicking along, working as it should, like a well-oiled machine. We expect our cars to work well, our appliances to just work. We don't expect to have many interruptions. We had to buy a couple new appliances recently, and found as we were talking to people at the stores that if we wanted a particular model, we might have to wait for a long time because the supply line has been disrupted. It feels that way in this pandemic, doesn't it? The whole supply line in some way is disrupted and changed. We can't get together in the same ways we used to. In the midst of this waiting and struggling and wondering, we are invited to let our light shine, our lamps burn.

It brings me to the question, how are our lamps doing in the midst of all of this? How is it going? How are our lights shining, working, giving glory to God? What it makes me think about is how coming into this uncertainty I think about the maidens going out to wait over the course of the evening. Some took just enough oil to make it through to when they thought the bridegroom was going to come. But he was delayed. Some were wise enough to bring extra oil. What it makes me think about is how we need that extra oil.

In Judaism, oftentimes the oil was thought of as the Torah, or as good works. I tend to think of it more as the energy needed to do the good works, to let our light shine. And perhaps thinking about the Torah, the scripture; the teachings of Jesus are a good portion of our central scripture. It makes me think how important it has been to me to have a foundational faith to hold onto through this time of uncertainty. How I continue to feel like there is a way that my oil container gets filled when I take time to pray, when I take time to read scripture, when I take time to study with others, when I take time for fellowship in the forms that we can have, often across Zoom or a little bit here on Sunday morning. I think about how we get that energy we need to let our lights shine in the midst of the darkness in those moments when we are waiting and wondering.

I think this passage invites us to recognize that there are times of darkness and waiting, and yet it invites us to let our light shine, to think about how we can continue to show the love of God and the love of neighbor. The passage doesn't leave us there. It doesn't simply leave us waiting. It says there are moments of fruition, a time when the bridegroom comes. The passage we read earlier points us toward that final banquet. And yet, Jesus doesn't start this story by saying it is about the end of time. He says it's

about the kingdom of God. What I think he's suggesting is that not only do we have that final banquet to look forward to, but there are moments where we experience precursors along the way; prequels, if you'll allow me to use that word. Times where we enter into the banquet. You might think of those in your own life. Moments when you feel like the bridegroom has come, a moment of joy, a time when God's world has broken through and you see it.

As I was thinking about this, I began to think about how worship is one of those times for me. Worship is a time of banquet. It's a time where I am invited to come and to recognize the wonder of who God is, the joy of God's gifts, the grace God has given us, the encouragement we have through Jesus and through the scriptures and through worship together. In some ways, worship, to me, is one of those little banquets, a time when I recognize the sustenance I am given by the grace of God.

He suggests at the end there is a certain amount of faithfulness through the dark, shining our lights and being ready, that enables us to engage in the banquet more easily.

As I read this passage, I heard in it the invitation to let our lights shine so that good works can be seen to the glory of God and do that even in the darkness, to let our lights shine in this dark time and know that the energy we need to do that comes through the very grace of God given us through prayer, through worship, through times of study and encouragement with one another, and to know that we have the hope and indeed even the experience of those moments of banquet where we recognize God's presence with us, God's grace among us, the way God sustains us and encourages us.

I invite you to think about those times in your own life and how we can continue to use those times to enable our lights to shine, to do the good works that God has given us to do to the glory of God, even in the midst of our present darkness. Amen.