

Matthew 25: 1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When 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 young women got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ 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 young women came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you; I do not know you.’ Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

There are 10 bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom but he’s late, and it gets later, so they all fall asleep. When someone shouts out that he’s on the way, they quickly get up and get ready. But only half of the bridesmaids brought extra oil for their lamps. The other five didn’t and ask the others for some of their oil. But they refuse. The wise one’s quote to them the Boy Scout motto: “Always be prepared” and add a dash of “sucks to be you.” The have-nots run off to the dealer while the haves waltz into the banquet with the bridegroom and have a gay ‘ol time with the doors to the party firmly locked. End of parable.

Gives off that warm and fuzzy Christian giving vibe, doesn’t it?

There is a message in this scripture passage for us today but let me start by telling you what it isn’t.

- First, *it isn’t* that the organized get to heaven and the disorganized are out of luck. Which is a good thing. As someone who is known to occasionally “fly by the seat of my pants” I’m relieved that is the case. After all, the Beatitudes don’t include *blessed are the organized for they will feel satisfied*.

Second, it isn’t a passage about getting ready for the end times. Some of you might want to argue with me on that, after all it is a theme in the story, but I don’t see it as the main message in the story.

True, the end times and the 2nd Coming of Jesus loom large over chapters 24 and 25 of the gospel of Matthew. This is a parable. It’s a story — one of several— that Jesus told in response to a question the disciples asked in Matthew 24:3 *“When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”*

We don't spend a lot of time in this church thinking about or worrying about the apocalypse. Apocalypse means revelation — but in our culture it means end times. There are churches that are talking about it *a lot* these days. Actually, even some out-there new-agey types are getting into the discourse of apocalypse.

Whenever it feels like things are getting bad in the world, and it feels that way now, people start thinking end times. Almost every generation from the time of Jesus until today has thought that they would be the last generation. Do you remember all the hype around Y2K? Also, anytime there is war in the Middle East, talk of the end times amps up. People start prepping for the ensuing disasters. Now I'm all for being prepared for emergencies, and after this area has lived through an ice storm 25 years ago and a global pandemic and with Climate Change heating up, there is a sense that it might be a good idea to have a few things on hand so you can weather a storm for a few days.

This text isn't about prepping. I don't think the message of this text is "Jesus is coming, look busy!" or, more to the point, it's not about figuring out when Jesus will return. Some people get in really deep with the predictions of the end times. It's not good on a number of levels. One reason that it's not good is that so often *the focus in the midst of the fear becomes internal*. Save yourself! Look out for number #1 and maybe a couple of people in my tribe I like a little bit!

Jesus says just in the chapter before "We don't know the hour or the time."

The early Christians believed that Jesus would return again, and soon. In fact, in their minds, he was late. They thought he'd be back by now! They thought things would be better by now. Resolved. Perfect. Jesus started something. He brought life to those who believed, and they thought he'd have come back by then and sorted out the rest of the mess in the world. But instead of things getting better, they seemed to be getting worse.

Remember that the gospels were written after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew's gospel is believed to have been written around 80 CE, or about 45-50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospels are written in a time when the early church is experiencing persecution, first from religious Jewish authorities and then later from Rome and emperors like Nero.

The point of this story is not that 'the end is coming soon — get ready!' but rather that the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus is delayed. It's taking longer than we thought. But don't give up! Don't give up being the church. Don't give up following Jesus. Don't give up doing good.

This parable can be understood a little more if we keep reading Matthew 25. Matthew 25 ends with the more familiar text where Jesus paints a picture of himself sitting on the throne and judging and separating the people. Everyone is surprised on that day of judgement — both those who are granted eternal reward and those who are not — because the criteria ends up being "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in

prison and you visited me.” And the people respond, “When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked or in prison” and Jesus answers “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

But the judgement is not about being prepared and having all your i's dotted and your t's crossed. It's a message to the church to not give up being the church and doing the good that we are called to do.

It is ok to be weary. The bridesmaids all got weary waiting, and they all fell asleep. People make a big deal about the 5 foolish and the 5 wise ones, but every one of them gets weary and falls asleep. Just like every one of the disciples does in Matthew chapter 26, when Jesus asks them to stay awake and pray. They all fall asleep.

The early church was weary with persecutions and a world that didn't match how they thought it would look. Sort of like an early church mid-life crisis where they are all saying, “I didn't think this is where we would be at this age.” Maybe you are feeling that about your life. I certainly feel that about the world today: “I didn't think this is how the world would look right now.”

Yesterday was Remembrance Day. Part of the purpose of Remembrance Day is the whole “Lest we forget.” We are called to remember so we don't replay and re-enact the horrors of the First and Second World Wars. But as we look around the world today you can't help but wonder -- as the old folk song goes: “When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn?” Or as Laura prayed in our evening service last Sunday “How long O Lord?” How long is the world going to be so hurtful, evil and just plain stupid?

It is natural and normal to feel overwhelmed and weary with all that is going on. Be aware of it, acknowledge it.

I think overloaded is a feeling that many have today. Partly because there is so much crap in the world today. Everywhere you look there is need, and something we are called to care about and perhaps do something about.

Psychologists say as humans we were designed to worry about and handle the joys and the challenges of a village. We have the capacity on a physical and emotional level to care for a certain number of people and situations. But today, thanks to the 24hr news cycle, and thanks to the blessings of the internet and to a world that is just far, far more connected, we know far more, and can be weighed down by an endless tide of the cares of the world.

The needs of the world outstrip the reserve in my tank.

I want to remind you that you are not called to carry the weight of the world. As Sarah Young writes in her book *Jesus Calling* “only the Christ can do that and live”. The author Suzanne Stabile invites us to prayerfully ask these discernment questions:

What's MINE to do, and what's NOT mine to do?

What's MINE to say and what's NOT mine to say?

And the third one is harder:

What's MINE to care about and what's NOT mine to care about?

This does not mean that some things are not worth caring about. I have no doubt that what worries you in the world is worth the care and the attention of people. But you can't worry about all of it all by yourself. We hold what we are called to pray for, speak out for, help with, but we also trust that there are others called to care for different things; and that together, if we all cared for what we are called to care for — no more and no less — the world would be cared for.

How we long for the day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes (every tear, not some tears) and death will be no more! The text is not asking us to figure out when God will return. But as we wait, in the middle of the long night of waiting — it's saying "Don't lose heart! Don't give up!"

Where are you in the story?

The bridesmaids were waiting for the bridegroom because they were called to light the way for the glorious procession. They all came with lamps and oil in them. Some just didn't anticipate how long and how hard it would be. If I were to place myself in the story, I'd be one of the women who didn't have enough.

That's ok. There is no judgment in running on empty. The problem was they forgot what light they were called to shine. They all forgot. It was the wise ones who sent them away and told them to go to the dealers. They forgot where the light comes from.

Those of you who have enough oil in your lamp but are worried you don't have enough to share with a weary and empty world, don't send others to the dealer! Don't go to the dealer yourself. They went to a dealer to get their light and their joy. How often we do that. Some of us literally go to dealers, some go to a bar or numb out on social media or binge-watching shows because we're too exhausted to be present. Some dig into their perfectionism and desire to bring control and order to a situation. Be present. Be awake. Present to the pain, present to the light.

Those of you who have enough oil in your lamp but are worried you don't have enough to share with a weary and empty world, remember what light does in the darkness. It only takes the smallest amount of light to scatter the darkness. Invite someone who doesn't have enough to stand next to you. Can you picture that scene of the bridesmaids standing like an honor guard shining their lights? If the 5 with light had stood in between each of the ones without, there would still have been a glorious amount of light to welcome the bridegroom! You have enough — not enough for every person and every problem — but God has given you enough for today *and* enough to share with what and whom God has called you share the light.

What they needed to do, what we all need to do is to stay and be present to the light of life. There is enough light because it's not our light in the first place. Jesus said "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*" Don't be afraid. That light is for you! Don't give up. Stay present. Share your light.

Thanks be to God.