

Prepared to Wait, in Hope & Trust
Matthew 25: 1-13
November 8, 2020
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This sermon was composed earlier in the week, as our nation collectively awaited voting results and news of the Presidential election's winner. It has been a week of feeling suspended between event and outcome, of watching returns and not knowing exactly when or how a final result would be announced. In the Spirit's uncanny timing, our gospel lesson for the day is about waiting, about wise or foolish ways of living suspended between hope and fulfillment.

For some, the week's end brought hope fulfilled. For others it did not. Like so many events of this past year, the election has laid bare raw emotions. Perhaps the emotional impact of being suspended between hope and fulfillment, between longing and answer, can help us bend our ears to hear Jesus's message, which might be summed up as "in the long wait that is to our earthly lot, the wise one builds up their spiritual strength, cultivates their reserves of faith and trust, which lead, ultimately, to light."

Only Matthew's gospel offers us this strange story of bridesmaids awaiting a bridegroom. It appears amid a longer teaching about the end of time, the coming judgment, the need to stay committed to Jesus, even when his presence does not come as expected. It starts in the minutes leading up to a wedding, when the bridal party has gathered at the bride's home, to await the bridegroom's arrival. Some scholars suggest the custom of the time was for the bridal party to assemble at the bride's home, awaiting the groom. When the groom appears, the bridesmaids greet him, and then form a bright processional with their lamps, leading the wedding party from one house to the groom's house, when the wedding feast will commence.¹

Let's imagine the groom was expected to arrive at 6:00 p.m. that early hour for dinner, when daylight fades, and lamps are lit. Decked out in their finery, the bridesmaids assemble in the front hall, striking matches, sharing light to make their lamps aglow for the imminent procession. But six p.m. turns into seven, seven turns into nine. Weary of standing, the bridesmaids sink to the floor, then lean upon each other. At nine becomes ten, their eyes growing droopy, they fall into sleep. The flames of their oil lamps burn down around them.

It is hard to wait. It is hard to stand in line, shifting your load side to side, barely moving forward minute by minute. It is hard to sit by the phone, knowing that its news alert affects you and so many others, awaiting its buzz. When your waiting extends long past its expected deadline, it's natural to get anxious, start to fidget, to wonder if the bridegroom got lost, or hurt, or decided forgo the marriage. And while a wedding may not be the most natural image for Christian discipleship, waiting the full fruition of God's party, the marriage of mercy and justice, forgiveness and freedom, healing and extravagant love, is a space that we, faithful followers,

¹ Buchanan, John, "Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 25:1-13" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 284-288.

find ourselves at some point along the journey. For each us, is asked, as one preacher said, “to trust in the promise of God’s kingdom, without the full power to make it come true.”

The town clock is chiming midnight when the groom finally appears. Maybe he’s been delayed by the mundane stuff of a missing shoe, wrong-colored suitcoat, a shaving nick that needed attention. Sometimes it’s the ordinary stuff that chips away at God’s arrival – like denominational policies, music style disagreements, miscommunications nursed into grudges. Or maybe his journey has been hindered by more serious set-backs: the long silence of unanswered prayers, the heart-break of centuries of injustice, the cruelty the world can display, the sense of being one single bridesmaid among of sea of torch-bearers, ignored or forgotten among the multitude. I’m playing a bit with the parable, because, in truth, in this scenario it is Christ the bridegroom who has been delayed, and we are limited in knowing the reasons behind our wait. But we do know the powerlessness of waiting for a celebration of which we are not the host, standing at a table, hoping to be fed but without any access to the kitchen, and watching the light we tend dim down as the hours tick away.

When they see him finally coming up the path, the bridesmaids rush to pat down their hair, flounce out their dresses, and ready their lamps. One set of bridesmaids have anticipated a long evening, and brought extra oil. The other half, lacking in such foresight, do not have resources from which to draw. They find themselves searching at midnight for an open store. Theirs is the “futility of trying to prepare when it is too late.”²

The only difference between the two sets of bridesmaids is the extra oil. Oil has symbolic meaning in scripture. It is used to anoint people for God’s service. It crowns the head as a sign of God’s blessing. Its most basic function is to be the fuel providing light. Don’t set out to wait for God’s party without a reserve of oil, without the resources of faith to dwell on God’s timetable, resources of prayer, community, music, a sense of your place in creation, the power of the cross – for at some point or another, the night grows long.

Matthew draws this strong dividing line between those with oil and those without, calling one set wise and the foolish. I struggle with his harshness. I want the story that displays generosity, perhaps like the boy with 5 loaves and 2 fish, who helps to feed 5,000. But I think Matthew’s message is a different one, imploring us to remember that the habits of faithfulness cannot be bought in a midnight run to the store. Faithful life is to be intentionally cultivated. And some practices are ones another person cannot cultivate for you. After all, someone else can teach you how they season soup, but that one lesson cannot replace the skills gained of cooking every evening. Someone else can meet you at 5 a.m. at the Y, and knowing they are expecting you might spur your presence. But only you can drag yourself out of bed on a cold morning, learn to breathe underwater, and feel the ache in your muscles. Someone else can your prayer partner, or co-Bible student, but you have to choose to open your heart to God, to keep showing up at God’s table when your soul feels like a desert. The wise among us know that the gap between God’s shalom and our broken world is wide, deep, and has endured for millennia. They do not

² Boring, M. Eugene, “The Gospel of Matthew” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 450.

expect that all will be redeemed in one evening, in one year, in one victory but will require the labor of love that is prayer, patience, mercy, community, and justice.

Where are your reserves of oil? I, for one, discovered I needed an extra well of strength to walk faithfully through these days. I found such light-giving oil in conversations with you, with the prayers of others, with moments of bowing my hand on my desk, and drawing breathes beneath God's beautiful blue sky.

Weddings, John Buchanan reminds us, are fragile events³. There is joy, love, and profound hope at a wedding. There can also be tears, even tantrums, and the main characters like brides, grooms, parents, are stretched thin. Even in the joy, there can exist wounds - family tension or unfulfilled hopes. To be fully at a wedding, to be ready for the celebration - is hold gently a tender heart.

Elections are also fragile events; there can be happiness, celebration, a sense of victory, while also tears, disappointment, dashed hopes. This election season has been particularly fragile, happening in the middle of a pandemic, in a nation where there are deep chasms between how we see and understand our world. As those whose eyes are not fixed ultimately on a president, or any elected official, but on Jesus, we wait, hope, and travel through such fragility with extra supplies of compassion, with steady remembering that God is our destiny, our end point, and that our role is to lighting the path to God.

Faith is a sturdy thing, as well as a fragile thing. It does not come in a neat package bought off the shelf at midnight. It is bound up with prayer, scripture, listening, holy friendships. It is courage, risk and sometimes waiting in the dark. Faith is strengthened by habits – hope, trust, forgiveness, humility and a most of all a decision to love. May we who wait on Christ carry such resources, so that we help usher in his holy celebration.

³ Ibid.