

Advent as Waiting: The Ten Bridesmaids and the Bridegroom

Matthew 25:1-10

November 29, 2020

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One of the great gifts of the Church to us is the Christian Year which begins in Advent. It is different from the secular calendar year that begins January 1, and it has different sets of holidays or feast days than the secular calendar. It means life can begin anew as it circles around the life of Christ. That feels like good news to me!

The theme of Advent this year is The Women of Advent, and we begin with the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. Advent offers us the spiritual gift of waiting and invites us to prepare not for the worst but for the best.

I

Jesus often used the Hebrew method of teaching that distinguished between being wise and being foolish. Today's parable is often entitled, "The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids." But don't forget the Bridegroom! So the better title is: "The Bridesmaids and the Bridegroom."

Jesus begins the parable saying: “The kingdom of Heaven can be compared to ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to a wedding!” Over and over Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a wedding feast. The kingdom of God is *joy*, the joy of a wedding feast.

Don’t forget the *joy!* It is an essential dimension of life in the kingdom of God. Let it be full! And as the poet Mary Oliver said, “Joy is not made to be a crumb!” It is the whole fruitcake!

In that current Jewish world weddings were so important that daily obligations—even study of the Torah—were suspended so everyone could participate in its joy.

The bridesmaids had a number of roles, but one of the most important was to lead the procession of the bridegroom to the wedding hall with torches ablazing.

In the parable there were ten of them. Five were wise and five turned out to be foolish. The foolish filled their lamps with oil, all the oil they thought they would need. The wise bridesmaids carried along a jug of oil so they would be prepared if the bridegroom and wedding were delayed.

As often happens in life, the *unexpected* happened! The bridegroom was delayed. And during the evening the bridesmaids fell asleep. Maybe too much wine!

Then at midnight the joyous cry rang out: “*Behold the bridegroom!* Come out to meet him!”

When they arose and began to trim their wicks and light them, the wise bridesmaids were all set because they had brought extra oil, but the foolish bridesmaids were in a pickle because their oil had been all used up. They went to the other bridesmaids and said, “Give us some of your oil, ours is out!” The other bridesmaids said, “We have only enough for ourselves. If we gave you some of ours there would not be enough to light the way for the bridegroom. So go buy some from the oil merchant.”

Alas—alas seems to happen a lot in life—while they were away buying oil the bridegroom came and the five wise bridesmaids led him to the wedding. When the foolish bridesmaids got to the wedding hall the doors were shut! The original version of the parable may have ended with verse 10. And Matthew supplied the rest to tell us to be alert for Jesus’ Second coming whenever that might happen. If it ended here, we don’t know what happened at the closed door—just like we don’t know what happened with the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son after the father welcomed him to the party. Maybe the

five wise bridesmaids heard them knocking and went joyfully to let them in. The kingdom of God, after all, is joy!

II

As I prepared to preach on this parable the first truth that came to me was this: the spiritual life requires the ability for waiting. Advent teaches us how to wait. We want instant salvation but sometimes salvation comes slowly. We want fast food for the soul, but what is required is what people call today, “slow food.”

We have a “quick-a-holic” religion. “*Quick and easy*” is the slogan. So we have created a franchise religion named McChurch where spiritual fast food is served. “Over 500 million saved!”

The best symphony is not the one that can play Beethoven’s Ninth the fastest. True spirituality has its own pace, and a different pace for each of us.

Henry David Thoreau who set up his home at Walden Pond taught us how to slow down. He ends a poem with this line: “We went to heaven the long way around.” Sometimes in our spiritual life we need to take the long way around. At the age of 25 he wrote, “Nothing can be more useful to a person than a determination not to be hurried.”

Hello, my name is Steve, and I am a “quick-a-holic.” And not very “recovering” either. If I can cram ten things to do as a pastor in one day, that’s better than five. Well, not always!

In the comic strip written by Doug Marlette, *Kudzu*, there’s a character, Reverend Will. B. Dunn. In one strip he is on his knees, praying to the heavens, “Lord, give me patience!” In the next frame he is waiting. In the next frame he looks up and says, “Well?!?!”

III

Waiting is an essential dimension in the spiritual life. There are times when we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness, and there is no “quick and easy” way out. Life feels “long and hard”. There are “in-between” times in our lives where we have left or lost the last place that felt right and good, and the next right place is nowhere in sight. It can be discouraging, even frightening. We can be living in what the mystics called “the dark night of the soul”, and the night has been so long we begin to lose hope.

Paul says,

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what they see? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Romans 8:24-5).

Today we light the Hope candle. Hope in the Hebrew Bible means “waiting”, waiting for God. So, the Psalmist encourages us in times of waiting:

Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God!

Hope in the Lord, for in the Lord is steadfast love and plenteous redemption.

In other words, hang on to the goodness of God. The prophet Isaiah said to those in exile:

They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Somedays God comes, and we renew our strength; sometimes God comes, and we mount up with wings as eagles; someday God comes and we can run and not be weary; and some days, our worst days, God comes and we by the grace of God walk and not faint—and for this day that will be enough.

Somedays we find ourselves in a spiritual crisis, in young life, mid-life, or later life. We want it to be over *now!* But as the caterpillar in the cocoon we must wait til the right time to emerge as a butterfly, and we wait til the right time comes and we can be who God is now making us to be.

But there's more to the parable than the gift of waiting, the readiness to wait. It is also about being *prepared*, and before you think I am about to launch into the Boy Scout pledge, Be Prepared, I'm talking about preparing not for the *worst* but for the *best*!

We've spent most of 2020 preparing for the worst—and some of it may have saved our lives and others' in the pandemic. But Advent teaches us to prepare for the best! At midnight the cry goes out, “Behold the Bridegroom! The Bridegroom comes!”

There is a *divine unexpectedness* in life when God breaks unexpectedly into our lives, not as a “thief in the night”, but as the Bridegroom.

We spend a lot of mental and emotional energy preparing for the worst. Some of that can be wise. But much of it is a kind of generalized anxiety that is of no good use.

The gospel calls us today to start getting ready for a wedding!

One of my favorite Bach cantatas is called, in the German, “*Wachet Auf*”, or *Awake!* Part of the reason I like it is its great cello line, but the main reason is that it is so filled with joy, almost a dance. Behold the Bridegroom comes! Get ready to dance!

One of the most important images of Jesus in the gospels and in Christian history is *Jesus the Bridegroom*. He is the bridegroom of our soul, the lover of our soul.

The *Song of Songs* in the Hebrew scriptures is an ecstatic love song. It can almost make you blush. It has been used in both Hebrew and Christian tradition as an allegory for our love for God and God's love of us. One verse goes: "My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh" (1:13), the perfume of love.

Bernard of Clairvaux was captivated by the image of Christ the Bridegroom and the *Song of Songs*. He wrote 86 Sermons on the first two and a half chapters of *Song of Songs*. (His congregation may have sighed: "Here comes another one!") We sing a hymn he wrote based on his sermons:

Jesus the very thought of thee
with sweetness fills my breast,
but sweeter far thy face to see
and in thy presence rest.

In Jesus we have seen the face of God and now we know God's face and name is love.

So let us look for his face this season, in friend and strangers, in the beloved, in the least of these. He is there, you know! In more places than we can

imagine! So open the eyes of your eyes, the eyes of your heart and see! Behold,
the Bridegroom comes!