

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
 Sunday, November 8, 2020 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Proper 27 A. Amos 5:18-24. Psalm 70. Matthew 25:1-13

We've lived through quite an extraordinary week, haven't we...with a very contentious and still incomplete election and then with Covid upticks in our area and across the country.

And today, amid all the fears, confusion and unknowns that surround us, we've come to worship God and ground ourselves again in the larger reality of the God who created all things in love and who is right here with us in the midst of all that is swirling around us. In worship, we are reminded that there is more to life than what we have seen and experienced this past week. Let's put this past week in a context. As William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury said in 1930: "When we deliberate, God reigns; when we decide wisely, God reigns; when we decide foolishly, God reigns."

In the middle of all the chaos, all the unknowns, we need to remember that God still reigns! As one of the saints said, "the cross is steady while the world is turning." Our Eucharist today reminds us that our ultimate allegiance, our trust, our hope is not in any president, not in any political party, not in any nation. All our trust, all our hope for the present, for the near future and the long-term eternal future is found in Jesus Christ. Let the words and the music of the Messiah begin to echo in your mind and heart to ground you: "And he shall reign for ever and ever, King of kings and Lord of Lords. Alleluia, Alleluia."

As we remember Jesus hanging on the cross out of love for us and for every person in the world he created, we are reminded that Jesus did not come into a world where everyone behaved well all the time. Jesus came into a world filled with injustice, violence, sickness, self-centeredness, greed. Jesus came to demonstrate for us how a human life, lived in the love of God can bring healing, hope, courage, joy, peace to this troubled world.

While we may be sad and fearful about the brokenness and injustices that have been revealed in this election year and by the Covid virus, we should not be surprised. Christ came to bring and embody Good News for this broken world. And Christ sent us to bring and embody God's Good news in the brokenness of our generation. We have a mission to fulfill as followers of Jesus, at this time and place in our lives.

How do we identify and fulfill our mission?

In our first reading, we heard the very challenging and uncomfortable words of the prophet Amos. During his lifetime, Israel had attained a height of territorial expansion and great national prosperity. Their military security and economic affluence were taken as signs that God was pleased with them and their support of their religious shrines and institutions.

But in the decade of 760 to 750 BC, God sent Amos to speak challenging words of confrontation to the people of Israel who were very comfortable with their religion and their good life. He said, so you want God to show up and bless you? Let me tell you, when God

shows up, God will confront you about your self-satisfied complacency. God hates the ways you gather for worship and call on God's name and sing all kinds of songs to God. Why? Because your religiosity is self-serving and the way you live with your neighbors is contrary to the way I created you to live. Amos says, what God expects from you is to change the way you treat your neighbors, especially the poor. God says, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness life and ever flowing stream."

God was confronting the shallow religion and complacency of the people of Israel. Throughout this whole book, Amos confronts the powerful rich of his time who use God's name to legitimize their sin and greed at the expense of the poor. God insists that love requires, not just religious language and rituals, but the personal and systemic practice of justice for the poor and marginalized.

Of course, the people of Israel were not happy to hear the words of God that Amos spoke. Yet Amos is part of a long line of prophets God sent to help Israel and other nations realize that they were accountable to God, the Creator of the universe, for the way they lived and the way they treated all their neighbors. This week, if you want to read strong language from God to a nation, you might read and reflect on the book of Amos.

Amos makes me wonder, if God were to send a prophet to speak to our nation today, what would that prophet be saying? Do you recognize any voices speaking today who might be contemporary prophets from God?

The truth is, all of us are still learning how to be aware of and love our neighbors. Our nation is still struggling to learn and at times intentionally rejecting God's call ...to practice personal and systemic love and justice for all our neighbors. We are still arguing over who is our neighbor that we are to love through the policies and laws and salaries of our nation.

Amos pushes us to ask, How can we as imperfect individuals and as an imperfect nation learn to grow in love and just mercy for all our neighbors?

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us some clues by telling a parable about the importance of our choices. Jesus says, once upon a time there were ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to come. The five wise ones chose to take extra oil for their lamps. The five foolish ones chose not to take extra oil.

The bridegroom and his bridal party were very late in arriving back at the family home after the wedding so they could be welcomed by the village. As the night wore on, the bridesmaids all got drowsy and fell asleep. When the message came at midnight that the bridegroom and the wedding party were arriving, the bridesmaids quickly got up and reached for their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise ones, "Give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out." The wise ones said, NO! It would not be wise or loving for us to give you our oil so that we all run out of oil and there is no one to celebrate and light the way for the wedding party to arrive at home. So the girls with the extra oil went on ahead to welcome the bridal party, while the foolish ones went to buy more oil.

Let's pause the story here for a moment. In biblical times, oil was a symbol of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, of God's Spirit flowing into a person for a particular mission or purpose. Remember, Samuel anointed David as future king of Israel, and the Spirit guided his life from that moment onward. Oil also symbolized healing. Remember the Good Samaritan poured oil on the man who was half dead along the road as a sign of God's healing power for him in his sickness. And oil is a symbol of energy to produce light, give wisdom and guidance, as in the lamps of the bridesmaids in the parable.

Let's consider how the symbolic meaning of oil in the parable connects to our situation right now.

Like the sleeping bridesmaids, most of us are really tired from all Covid restrictions. Isolation can be exhausting. The loss of the familiar patterns of life and relationships can be exhausting. And with the recent upticks in cases, we are facing the reality that Covid will not be over soon. We may still be struggling with limitations from Covid for a long time, which can feel overwhelming.

We are also facing the reality that our election will not resolve the political divisions in families, communities, states and our Nation. Our divisions will continue into the coming years.

Like the bridesmaids, we would be foolish if we don't prepare ourselves for the long journey, the long struggles that are ahead of us. We need to be prepared and energized, fueled, to carry the renewing love and power of the Spirit of Jesus, the oil of healing for our wounds and our neighbors wounds, the energy of the Holy Spirit to shine in us and help us be lights for the world, bringing the love of Christ to others constantly during this long journey that is ahead of us.

We will be wise if, every day, we renew and refill our lamps, our minds, hearts and bodies by nurturing our intimate relationship with God through little daily spiritual practices...like prayer and meditation, reading and reflecting on the Scriptures, through conversation with others and attentiveness to God's presence in Creation and in each moment, through practicing God's compassion for people in need around us in our daily circles and in our society. As we live in continual conversation and communion with God's Spirit day by day, God will keep energizing us and guiding our lives. Our intimate relationship with Christ can keep sustaining us, showing us how to be people of love and justice through all that life brings.

Of course, some days, some weeks our routines get shifted and we all forget to maintain and keep going deeper in these spiritual practices. We don't beat ourselves up for this. When we notice we are feeling exhausted, spiritually empty, out of touch with the life-giving presence of God, our exhaustion and emptiness will be our body reminding us to renew our relationship with God through little daily spiritual practices.

How are you filling your lamp, your heart, soul, body and mind with the renewing power, healing, wisdom and light of God's Holy Spirit...so that you will have strength, endurance, the

energy of God's love to keep sharing with others in need around you ...both now and for the long haul?

Let us close our eyes and pray...be aware that Jesus is right there with you, where you are watching this service, looking at you with eyes of compassion.

What little changes might Jesus be inviting you and me to make in our daily routines this week so that we can be spiritually renewed by the oil of God's Holy Spirit....to keep living lives of love, kindness, healing, encouragement and justice...in little ways...both this week...and over the long journey that lies ahead of us?

“Day by day, Dear Lord, three things we pray: to see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, follow Thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.”