

Oil I Need Is A Miracle
2 Kings 4:1-7; Matthew 25:1-13
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Thanksgiving passes quickly. Some years it seems that the last piece of pie has barely been swallowed before the preparation for Christmas begins. The Friday and Saturday after Thanksgiving are the most popular times to get a Christmas tree, to put it up and hang lights, to decorate the house. We start Christmas shopping, order Christmas cards, and try to fill our December calendars with all of the important events that lead up to the blessed holiday itself. The time of preparation is hectic, busy, rushed, and stressful.

Last Sunday was, in addition to being Thanksgiving weekend and the first Sunday of Advent, the first day of Hanukkah. You are probably familiar with Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, even though (from what I understand) it's a relatively minor Jewish holiday. It has obviously gained a lot of cultural significance in America because of its proximity to Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Growing up, I remember learning things about the holiday, but they were always things about how it was celebrated. Someone brought dreidels to school for kids to play with—we didn't really know what the symbols stood for, but they were fun to spin. Someone might also bring doughnuts or latkes, which were delicious even if we didn't know why exactly we were supposed to eat them on this holiday. It wasn't until much later in life, though, that I learned the history of Hanukkah.

Hanukkah is (among other things) a remembrance of the "miracle of the oil," part of the Maccabean Revolt as recounted in the Talmud. The revolt took place roughly 200 years before the time of Christ when a group of Israelites—the Maccabees—liberated the temple from Hellenistic control. Once the temple had been freed, the Jews who gathered there wanted to rededicate the temple by lighting a menorah, but they could only use pure, sanctified olive oil. They only had enough sacred oil for one night, and eight nights would pass before they could get the sanctified oil. Miraculously, the oil they had burned for all eight nights, leading to the holiday that we know today.

Now...my understanding of Hanukkah is extremely limited, and I'm definitely leaving some parts out, so take all of this with a grain of kosher salt. And this is also a story that comes from a place outside our scripture, so I would hesitate to give it the same authority that I'd give a passage from our Bible. But when I hear about Hanukkah, I can't help but notice it sounds an awful lot like multiple narratives from our Bible, stories about miracles and about oil and its significance.

Take, for instance, two Old Testament passages, one featuring Elijah and one featuring Elisha, where the oil is plentiful instead of limited. In 1 Kings, God instructs the prophet Elijah to travel to a widow who will feed him during a famine. When he arrives, she tells him that she has no food, just a small amount of flour and a little bit of oil. Elijah tells her that if she uses the flour and oil to feed him first, "the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth," ending the famine.¹ This, of course, is what happens.

¹ 1 Kings 17:14

Then, in 2 Kings, the prophet Elisha encounters a widow in a similar predicament. This is the scripture that we read today, where the widow is in debt and has only one jar of oil to her name. Elisha instructs her to gather other vessels, the jar fills them all up, and the woman is able to satisfy her debts.

These three stories—Hanukkah, Elijah, and Elisha—are thematically connected by a jar of oil that keeps flowing longer than it should. It is a strange symbol, and yet it must be an important one to show up repeatedly in this way. It is worth pondering what, exactly, the oil represents in these stories.

In the story featuring Elisha, the oil is primarily used to gain funds which can then pay off a widow's debt. On the surface, the oil seems to represent money. It would be possible to bend and twist this to result in the moral, "be obedient to God's prophets and you'll never have to worry about money again." Given the typical lack-of-wealth of God's prophets, however, that doesn't seem like a good message.

Elisha saving the widow is part of a series of passages where he miraculously intervenes on behalf of people who are at their wit's end. He grants a child to a couple who has given up on becoming parents, performs a resurrection, makes food edible for a group starving through famine, and makes a sack of bread last longer than it should. His miracles are not about material wealth but rather about sustaining those who are weak during their most miserable times.

In this text, then, the oil does not represent money or wealth. It represents providence. This is a story about caring for those in need, particularly during a time of crisis. Obedient faith leads not to money but to some form of sustenance.

This message is also part of the scripture featuring Elijah. Here, the oil more directly represents nourishment, as the widow is using the oil to prepare food. And as things wrap up, it becomes clear that the never-ending jug of oil will be good for staving off starvation but not for accruing wealth. Unlike the passage with Elisha, Elijah's narrative does not deal in finances at all. The widow remains in poverty.

Moreover, here it is first Elijah who is in need, directed by God to seek sustenance from a poor widow who does not have much to offer. Elijah does not go to this woman in order to save her; he goes to save himself. The fact that she and her son end up provided for is almost a side story to the overarching narrative throughout 1 Kings.

Focusing on this widow and her son, however, can help us to draw a few conclusions about faith, selflessness, and need. The woman in need in this story still finds the faith to give to someone else. Her own providence is rooted in her willingness to give to another and in her faith that Elijah, a man of God, will not steer her wrong. When she acts on that selflessness and shares what she has with a stranger, something good happens.

I know too many good people who have given generously and received nothing in return to believe that this is always how God works. Oversimplifying these stories is a dangerous gambit. But the principal ideas that God asks us to be selfless and God desires to provide for us ring true.

The oil in these stories isn't magic oil, but it does represent and convey the idea that God will put blessings in our lives—sometimes more than we expect or than we can rationally account for—and that God hopes we will share of these blessings with others when the opportunity presents itself. The oil characterizes our faiths this way.

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In the Hanukkah tradition, the miracle of the oil is not connected to the idea of sustenance. Here, the oil is not being sold for money or used to prepare food. Here, the oil is burning only to give light.

If the miracle of Hanukkah is a jug of oil that doesn't go out, but it's not oil that would have been used to care for the needy or to prepare food, then that raises another important question: what does the oil in *this* story represent? It seems to be something different from the Elijah and Elisha passages, despite the fact that all of these stories are so similar in their miracles.

In fact, a better parallel might be the scripture that we read in Matthew today, the parable of the ten bridesmaids. In these verses, we are introduced to ten bridesmaids, five who are identified as wise and five who are identified as foolish. Jesus has to distinguish the wise from the foolish because they are otherwise identical. It is not their appearance, dress, or the lamps themselves that set apart the wise from the foolish; it is their state of preparedness that distinguishes them.² In this instance, the wise bridesmaids are prepared for the wedding feast and the foolish ones are not.

Of course, because this is a parable, we are left asking, "But what are they *really* prepared for?" This isn't actually a story about a wedding; it's an allegory about something else altogether. In fact, researchers note that there's not a lot about this parable that rings historically true: there is no evidence of lamps playing a significant role in early Palestinian weddings, nor would one expect to be able to buy oil in the middle of the night, and it seems strange that the bridesmaids are waiting for the groom instead of for the bride.³ This is absolutely a parable where the hard details are not the author's concern, and they should not be ours. Instead, we should be wondering, "What is the symbolism in this story?"

Most scholars who read these verses think that they are about the end times—that is, about the second coming of Christ. The wedding feast represents the kingdom of God. The bridegroom is Jesus, escorting some of humanity—some of the church, the wise—into the kingdom while others, the foolish, are denied entry. And the difference between the wise and the foolish is that some have "oil" and others do not.

The difference-maker for getting escorted—the wisdom of these bridesmaids—is a vibrant and genuine faith, one that cannot be loaned or borrowed because it is so engrained in each individual who possesses it, a living faith that gains its life through word and deed. So it is that the oil in this story actually does come to represent the same thing as it did in 1st and 2nd Kings: offering to others selflessly out of acts of obedient faith in a caring and providing God.

² Boring, M. Eugene (1995) "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Abingdon, 451.

³ *Ibid.*

In the end, the oil in all four of these stories is more representative of that kind of undying faith than it is of anything sustenance-related. For the widow approached by Elijah, offering the oil is an act of faith. For the widow who encounters Elisha, the never-ending oil is indicative of her own overflowing, overabundant faith. For the Maccabees who have taken back the temple, the oil symbolizes that their faith remains pure even though they have been through torment and conflict. And for the bridesmaids, the oil means that they have been faithful in word and in deed, lights that continued to shine through the darkest of night instead of lights that went out.

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Most people read the parable of the ten bridesmaids and conclude that it's about being prepared. Likewise, we talk about Advent being a season of preparation. When I think about "being prepared," I typically think of my old Boy Scout leaders instructing us about how to pack for a campout. There were certain things that you wanted to bring: a sleeping bag, a flashlight, a canteen, a firestarter. There were also certain things that you learned quickly not to bring, because they would only weigh you down or get in the way.

It is easy to read the story of the bridesmaids and think about what we need to bring in order to be prepared. "Don't forget the oil" seems like a message that is clearly about what we bring to the wedding. But the "oil" here isn't really a tangible object. It symbolizes something different.

When I was a Scout, the other way that we tried to be prepared was by doing our research. We would look at maps ahead of time and plan out how far we would need to hike in one day, or where good water sources could be found, or where we might want to camp for the night. We would plan menus. We learned how to do the things we needed to do to make the trip a success—how to cook over a fire, how to pitch a tent, how to tie knots. Being prepared was not only "what should we bring?" but also "what should we learn?"

That seems closer to the kind of preparedness that we're taking away from this scripture, the kind of preparedness that we shoot for in Advent. The bridesmaids with oil are called "wise" and the others "foolish," so it does seem like the wise ones must have learned something that the foolish ones did not. Still, this doesn't quite feel right. Reducing the lesson of this parable to knowledge makes it seem like preparing during Advent is nothing more than learning how the lights go best on the tree or remembering to order the Christmas cards early enough.

Perhaps a better question than either "what should we bring?" or "what should we learn?" is "*how* should we learn?" A few weeks ago, I preached on the value of wisdom as compared to knowledge. If the bridesmaids with oil are truly wise, then their gained understanding isn't just something they've learned in a class or Googled online. It's a deeper appreciation of humanity and divinity, an understanding that comes from above and that is evidenced in acts of humility and selflessness.

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When we were expecting our first child, there was a lot to do. The list started with us needing to move to a larger house; there wasn't room in the house we were living in. There were a lot of baby items we needed to get—a crib, a car seat, baby clothes, bottles, those little plastic inserts that go into electrical outlets...it was a massive amount of stuff. We picked out names. We toured Rex Hospital and mapped out routes from our home to know which was the fastest. We—mainly Jennifer—read about what to expect since we were expecting. We found a pediatrician. We talked with people we trusted.

In the end, when a baby is coming, people always say you never quite feel ready, even if you've done all that you can to prepare.

In the end, the moments that helped prepare us the most were the ones where we sat together and dreamed about what it would be like to be parents. We shared our fears and comforted and encouraged each other. We shared our excitement and joys, too, and let that fuel one another. We prayed.

The preparation that we do for the coming of the Christ child is similar. There is cause to gather the stuff and learn what needs to be learned, but there's still a pretty good chance that we won't quite feel ready. And there is a pretty good chance that, in addition to whatever else is on our list, we will find it critical to prepare for the birth of Jesus with dreams, with sharing, with moments of stillness, and with prayer. It is critical to do this especially because we are consumed with the busyness of the season. We prepare not only our lives but also our souls.

Ultimately, our world is big on preparation, but typically that preparation features a "do it yourself" mentality. We hope to become completely self-sufficient, to the point where we can diagnose any issues, learn how to solve or repair them by watching a five-minute YouTube video, order any necessary parts or materials online to be delivered to our houses, and then assemble everything completely with plenty of time to spare all by ourselves. We have conflated preparation with independence, mixed the idea of being ready with the idea of being autonomous.

But the preparation that our scriptures teach us is one where we are much more reliant on each other. It is a preparation that includes looking out for those in need, offering of oneself when the opportunity presents, and cultivating our faiths rather than only our stuff or our brains. If this is how we prepare for the return of Christ in the end times, it seems this is also how we should prepare for Christ's coming during Advent. We get ready for the miracle of the babe in the manger by softening our hearts and opening our minds. This sense of peaceful awe, not a hectic rush, is our attitude of preparation.

Living in the electrical era, pretty much the only time I think about oil is when my car dashboard lights up, but in Jesus' era, oil served a much more crucial role. It allowed for nourishment. It allowed for light in the darkness. And, in these stories we contemplate today, it allowed for a deeper understanding of how we prepare our souls for the arrival of Jesus: by seeking to provide for others out of a pure faith that keeps pouring out, even beyond the point where we expect it to dry up.