

Sermon "Never to Tired for Hope"  
Kirk of St James  
Sunday November 12, 2023  
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As some of you know I have a younger brother and sister. While growing up one of their favourite pastimes was hiding behind things then jumping out and scaring me. Nothing gets your heart pumping faster than walking down a dark hallway and suddenly someone leaps out from behind a door yelling. Facing sudden and unexpected circumstances can leave us feeling a variety of emotions. For example, when someone in the car ahead of us slams on their breaks our heart is likely racing because we need to react quickly. Sometimes our response to fear can be anger, for example Chad the boys and I were standing on the sidewalk opposite our community mailbox, and I ran across to check for mail when Grayson darted out into the road after me. My immediate response was anger because I was shocked and scared when it happened. Another response to the unexpected can also be panic. We are hosting our family for a meal and the turkey catches on fire or, the soup is too salty, and we find ourselves running around trying to come up with another plan. We do our best in any given situation to anticipate and plan but we know all too well that things can and do go wrong, often quite quickly.

In our gospel reading today the problem was actually not because something went wrong quickly, but rather because there was an unexpected delay. When we are anticipating something or waiting for something, a delay can make things feel like an eternity. In Matthew the ten bridesmaids all got dressed and were gathered waiting with their lamps. The issue was not even that they all fell asleep both the foolish and the wise, the problem was when they woke up some were prepared with more oil for their lamp, while others were not.

This parable is about the full manifestation of the "kingdom of heaven." Jesus has spent a great deal of time teaching about the kingdom and here he describes it in a setting his hearers

will know all too well. It was at a wedding that Jesus performed his first miracle, and now Jesus is explaining what believers need to expect and prepare for after his ministry is done.

Weddings and their customs were something that everyone in the ancient world would have been familiar with. So, by using this common imagery Jesus is explaining the role of the Messiah using the familiar example of the bridegroom. Weddings are emotionally loaded events, with lots of possibility for problems or mishaps. Feelings are raw and stretched thin, there is laughter, tears and maybe even anxiety or, anger. While we always do our best to plan everything perfectly there are often things we miss, and things were no different in Jesus' day.

Now weddings at this time happened in stages, there was a torch lit procession, and it would go through several stages with stops at both the brides and the bridegrooms' homes. It is therefore likely not surprising that with people moving from place-to-place things might become drawn out or behind schedule. By the time the wedding party arrived at the groom's home where an extended banquet would be carried out over a course of a number of days, it was the expectation that the bridesmaids would light torches and go out to meet them.

Now what happens next is something that is rooted in Jewish tradition, and that is contrasting wisdom and folly. It is the difference between being responsible or silly. We see this play out in the book of Proverbs where Wisdom and Folly are portrayed as two different women. As I mentioned in this account the women all begin the same way—by getting ready, lighting their lamps, and waiting. We all know how waiting can feel like eternity. We just need to be on hold with the phone company for a few minutes before it feels like it will never end. Waiting makes time slow, and can cause inattention, so it is not surprising that over time the bridesmaids fall asleep. Again, the problem is not that they fell asleep because all of them do, the issue is what happens when they wake up. Five have brought extra oil and can light their lamps, while

five did not prepare and are left running around town in the dark hoping to find a 24-hour grocer who will sell them lamp oil. It is not surprising that they do not find anyone, and by the time they come back it is too late to come into the feast.

I have always found this parable unforgiving. I don't like the closed door that does not reopen. We are all guilty of inattention. How many times do we start out watching a much-anticipated show only to wake up an hour or two later because we have fallen asleep and woke up during the credits. However, diving into the heart of what Jesus is saying here is important.

For people in the ancient world, it meant that they needed to adjust their expectations--the Messiah did appear as they expected and would not return when they expected. It also meant that until Jesus does return, we are to wait expectantly, faithfully, courageously, and hopefully. "Christian hope rests on trust that the God who created the world will continue to love the world...will continue the process of creation until the project is complete and will continue to redeem and save the world by coming into it with love and grace, in Jesus Christ...what distinguishes the foolish and the wise is readiness for the bridegroom, even in the face of delay. The wise are prepared for delay. Thus, when their faith in the bridegroom's return is tested, they have the resources available to sustain them.

Okay, if that is the case what does this look like practically today? That is a question we must wrestle with. There is a difference of opinion on what is meant by the example of the lamp oil. Is it faith, good works, love or almost any other Christian virtue? You could make a case for any number of them. One of the most helpful descriptions I came across was "The wise ones who have heard Jesus' teachings acted on them." In the case of the foolish bridesmaids, it suggests that being a Christian in name only is insufficient. If we hear the word on Sunday

morning, and then fail to live it the rest of the week our lamp oil will be empty. Our light will have gone out.

There is a tie in with Amos here because that is exactly what the truth speaking prophet is prophesying against. What good is empty ritual? So, what if the people sacrifice, do the rituals and go through the movements if they do not cause a shift in their hearts? What good is reading the law on one day and then going out and crushing the poor underfoot, letting the sick suffer and the poor starve? If the greatest of all commandments is that we love God and each other, and then we fail to do so in our daily living, we need to be called back to what is just and right, to what speaks love in the world.

I know how hard this is. We live in a world where we see evil, injustice, and suffering, and it is overwhelming. However, our faith tells us that we must live with courage, hope and love. It does not mean that we are insensible to suffering, it does not mean that we turn away from it and only talk about the good things. Faith allows us to wrestle with what is difficult in this world and strive to make a difference because we believe in the hope and power of Christ. This parable also reminds us that we are not always promised tomorrow, therefore we must always act as we are able to each day. May we always answer the call of Christ to help bring the kingdom of God to all the earth through love, hope, compassion and justice, and if we have periods where we get sleepy in our lives, may our community wake us back up.