

23 Pentecost A  
Amos 5:18-24  
Psalm 70  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Matthew 25:1-13

Rev. Trish Schmermund  
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton  
November 8, 2020

---

Grace and peace to you from Christ.

Cling to those words this morning, "grace and peace from Christ," as we face a tumultuous recipe of judgment, threat, and worry that emanates from this story of the wise and foolish attendants (or as in some versions, "bridesmaids.") We hear this parable in the context of our own lives that are filled with post-election trauma and pandemic escalation.

Grace and peace to you from Christ.

If I could have chosen the Gospel for today, it wouldn't have been this one. Yet there is a mysterious wisdom at work in the universe that this story should appear now. I say this, because it is a passage of hope and clarity – as I would always claim – that the Bible is about God's loving relationship with us. If we don't hear that in any given passage then I would call us to dig deeper. And that is what we will do this morning.

It's helpful to understand that the biblical writers were responding to situations of their own day. They were not in fact writing to us in some sort of future prediction or answer to our lives. (In saying that I would clarify, we do call the Bible a "Living Word," because it does relate to us, guide us, encourage and console us by way of the Holy Spirit in every time including our own.)

Matthew's day was fraught with turmoil. Power struggles, war, violence, oppression, uncertainty, fear... likely framed by two major themes: i) the destruction of the Temple and ii) a small, afraid, and doubting group of Jesus-followers who were ready to call it quits, because Jesus seemed to have reneged on his promise to return.

Let's talk about the Temple. For the Jewish community, the Temple was a physical and central place for the community. It's where the most important things happened. It had been a reminder of God's presence with the people for over 400 years. But, in the year 70 CE it was destroyed by Roman soldiers under Emperor Titus – the Temple and all it represented was gone. We can only imagine how tragic this must have been for the Jewish community and for many of the new Christians whose roots were the same.

Secondly, the early Christians clung to their newfound faith by a thread of determination. We know that even the Apostles hid after Jesus had died,

because they were afraid of persecution. It wasn't an easy time to be open or public about one's faith. But part of what kept them going was their understanding that Jesus was returning, and soon, very soon. We hear this thought of Jesus' impending return in 1 Thessalonians – one of the first books of the Second Testament to be written. It's amazing what we as humanity can endure if we imagine an end in sight. But, then Jesus *didn't* come back as they expected. All they thought they knew and were waiting for was in question. "What kind of a god is this anyway?" was the question whispered in close circles and behind closed doors.

We can assume then, Matthew, in writing this parable of the wise and foolish attendants, is not wanting to throw more logs onto the fire of uncertainty, fear, and instability. He is not wanting to pile upon them one more reason to doubt. Nor is he wanting to encourage division among them. He is writing a *gospel* story after all, a story of "good news."

That means we can dismiss some of the superficial conclusions that might come to mind. This is not a story about some people getting to heaven and some won't. It's not meant to dissuade us from sharing resources. It's not calling us to judge one another. And it's not an attempt to use fear to get people to *believe or else...*

It is perhaps, a call for God's people to look to the future. It's a call to lift our heads and our hearts out of the worries and concerns of the moment (where can I get more oil!) and trust that God has promised a love that cannot be taken away. To those in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine who were under the threat of Rome, who mourned the loss of the Temple, who feared daily for their lives, who's faith seemed to be under a siege of doubt – Matthew says "*hang in there, you have a place with God; stay the course.*" To be prepared then, perhaps is to know or trust there is a future beyond what we experience here and now; "stay awake," because there is a tomorrow that we cannot see through the door.

It's human nature to at times feel overwhelmed by what is happening to us or around us. That might sound like a massive understatement today. We are struggling to contain a pandemic that seems to be gaining ground with a mind of its own. The shadow of our national, southern neighbour looms large today and we have no idea what will come after this election. We grieve the loss of worship and gathering together that has been a staple of the human family since day one. People are fearful for their jobs, their health, their future.

It feels like midnight, like the longest part of the night. It feels like God (like Matthew's bridal party) is delayed, or worse, absent. It feels like our lamps are burning low as we become consumed by the worries of today.

Midnight, that moment that our strength is sapped or we fear defeat, is also however, the turning point. When we cannot manage or defend ourselves any longer, that's when we turn to the One who created us in the first place. Midnight is the moment a new day is actually beginning even though we can't see it yet. It's not the time to head to the corner store to buy a lottery ticket as our source of hope, it's not the time to abandon faith as a disposable appendage, but it is the moment we stay the course and cling to what we have learned all along, "*For God so loved the world...*" (Jn 3.)

We, as the Kindom of God, have the oil of hope within us. As a community we, like the biblical authors, are encouragement to each other. Matthew's parable might not give us definitive answers to our challenges, but it invites us to dig deeper, to come together, to trust in a future.

What could the Kindom of God be like? A people who know the importance of community, join in the work of justice and who speak hope into a frazzled world. A people who know and live the promises that nurture them in times of joy and sorrow. A family that reminds one another that God is good, and here, and eternal. The Kindom of God could be like – us!

Be blessed in this journey of faith. In the long nights, in the confusing days, in the moments of trial and discouragement, in celebration and joy – together we are.

Amen.