

“Anticipation”
Matthew 25:1-13
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Our story from the Gospel of Matthew for today could not be more timely. This is a story about waiting and watching.

- In the parable Jesus told, a group of bridesmaids were waiting for the bridegroom to arrive.
- As I prepare this sermon, it is two days after our national elections. All of us are waiting for the results.

Who will be the next President of the United States?

We are waiting and watching. Some wait in eagerness, some in fear, for what the future will hold. When it comes to the election, no matter how we feel about the outcome, we need to remember: God is still God, Jesus Christ is still Lord, and the work of the church remains the same now as it was before—to share the good news of Jesus Christ that is transforming the world through God’s love, mercy, and grace, especially for the most vulnerable among us.

Anticipation is the name of the game in today’s message. And if I have to be truthful, which I always want to be, I don’t do anticipation very well. That may be because, like so many of us today, I don’t like to wait. I’ve been conditioned, along with most of our society, to have my needs met right now.

- Want a book on gardening? I can order it from Amazon and have it tomorrow.
- Don’t want to fix dinner tonight? I go to one of the fast food places here in town and pick up a hot meal in minutes.

Sometimes, I don’t like to wait. And I get annoyed when my needs aren’t met on my schedule. Whether it’s calling a business with an 800 number only to be put on hold “for the next available representative,” or contending with slow internet service that pauses the movie I’m watching every two minutes, I just don’t like to wait.

Anticipation, waiting. I don’t do it very well. And chances are, there are some things you don’t wait for very well either. However, my six decades of living has taught me that waiting is a fact of life. And since that is the case, the best thing we can do is to be prepared to wait. We have a story today from the Gospel of Matthew that demonstrates the importance of waiting well.

- It’s a wedding day, one of the biggest celebrations in life. Folks in the time of Jesus made a big deal about getting married, just as we do today.
- Although we don’t have a lot of detail about the wedding customs of the times, a typical wedding in ancient Israel would usually go like this:
 - o The groom and his party would go from the home of his parents to the house of his bride’s parents. Once there, he would meet the bride and her wedding party. There could be a brief ceremony there after which...
 - o the wedding party moved from the bride’s house to that of groom’s parents, who prepared the wedding banquet.
 - o Wedding feasts could go on for several days, depending on the wealth of the hosts.
- As Jesus sketched this parable, 10 bridesmaids are waiting to welcome the groom.
- It is night, and each them has brought a lamp to light the way for the wedding party as they move from the bride’s house to the wedding feast.
- The wait is long—for some unknown reason, the groom’s arrival is delayed.
- At last, at midnight, the cry goes up...the groom is coming!
- The bridesmaids get out their lamps but five of them are unprepared—they don’t have enough oil for their lamps to make the trip to the bridegroom’s home.
- These five ask the other bridesmaids for some of their oil, but their request is denied. “No!” they replied, “there will not be enough for you and for us. Go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.”
- They went but by the time they got back, the bridegroom had come and gone, and the rest of the wedding party (including the five prepared bridesmaids) with him.

- By the time the five oil-deprived bridesmaids reached the wedding banquet, it was too late. They knocked on the door, begging to come in. But the bridegroom refused: “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.”

This story is one of a series of stories Jesus told his disciples about the signs of the return of the Messiah, or the Second Coming of Jesus. It’s lesson, imparted in the persons of the bridesmaids, seems pretty clear: be prepared. No one knows when Christ will return; only God the Father knows for certain. In the meantime, we’re waiting, anticipating, even anxious to welcome Jesus when he comes. But waiting is hard; like I said, no one likes to wait. We get distracted, we get tired of waiting...the only thing we’re ready for is a nap.

That’s just what happens to the bridesmaids:

- All 10 fall asleep.
- But only five are prepared for the coming of the bridegroom.

Therefore, stay awake! Be alert! Be ready!

Because the consequences are grave. As the parable indicates, those who are not prepared, those who come late to the party, will miss out on the banquet. Now, there are times in our culture when it’s appropriate to be fashionably late. Brides are supposed to show up a few minutes late to their wedding; interesting, how in the parable it was the bridegroom who was late, not the bride.

In the parable, the bridesmaids who were prepared are called the wise ones while the unprepared were called foolish. These characters point to the long tradition of wisdom literature in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Wisdom and Folly are portrayed as women. We meet them in the psalms but even more so in the Proverbs. There, Wisdom and Folly call out to passersby, offering their lifestyles to anyone who will listen.

“Out in the open wisdom calls aloud,” we read in the Book of Proverbs, “she raises her voice in the public square; on top of the wall she cries out; at the city gate she makes her speech...” (Proverbs 1:20-21).

The consistent message of wisdom literature is to choose wisdom because only the knowledge and fear of God will lead to life. From Proverbs again, Wisdom speaks:

“For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm” (Proverbs 1:32-33).

The wise bridesmaids came prepared, had enough oil in their flasks, and made it into the wedding banquet. Just so for those who live according to God’s word...the wise are those who follow God; their life is filled with God’s purposes; and, they wait for the coming of God by living in anticipation and in hope, doing God’s work in the world.

The foolish bridesmaids, those who were not prepared and did not bring extra oil, were denied entry to the banquet. Even worse, it seems, the bridegroom declared “I do not know you.” So it will be for those who do not live wisely, who do not follow God’s ways. When Jesus comes again, they will not enter God’s kingdom

I have to say, this response gives me a moment of pause. It seems harsh, almost cruel. I listen to the story of the bridesmaids and I want to hear a word of grace, a second chance, an opportunity for these foolish ones to redeem themselves. After all, does one mistake, one moment of forgetfulness, one error in judgment really mean they will not be able to enter eternal life with God, which is represented by this wedding banquet?

When we read this story and begin to think it lacks the grace of God we’ve come to love in other passages, let’s step back and remember a couple of things:

- God is God, and we are not. God is the Creator who loved us into being. God wants us to follow God’s ways. But it is God who makes the rules, not us. We have choices to make, every day—to follow or not. We are given ample opportunity to repent when we sin; and God is gracious in offering forgiveness. Eventually, however, failing to follow God and persistently turning away from God has consequences. At the end of the day, there is accountability and judgment that can lead to death. BUT...
- Remember why Jesus came into the world. Jesus came not to condemn but to save the world.¹ Some people don’t believe this. Some will refuse to believe it. Some are so self-righteous they think they don’t

¹ Gerrit Dawson, “Choose, Now!” in *Disciplines, A book of Daily Devotions, 2020*, (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Press, 2019), 373-374.

need saving. But the Gospel truth is that everyone needs God. Jesus tells us so. Jesus tells us God is merciful and full of grace to those who acknowledge God and repent of their sins.

So, when I think back to the story of the bridesmaids, I think the foolish ones represent those who reject wisdom, who refuse to follow God's ways, who choose not to be prepared for the coming of Jesus. An entire life lived in this manner will not end well—that's what the parable tells us.

The wise bridesmaids, on the other hand, both hear and do the will of God. They choose to live lives that are prepared for Jesus. What distinguishes the wise from the foolish bridesmaids in this story is who has oil for their lamps and who does not. Those who came prepared brought with them reserves of oil. That oil in the story has been compared to the faith we need for our journey through life.²

We need a full supply of faith in God as we go from day to day, year to year, season to season of life. Faith in God helps us through good times and bad. We need it even more when tragedy strikes and eventually, at one time or another, it will strike.

Will Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop and author of many books on the Christian faith, told a story about ministering to a family who had only come to church a couple of times. One day, the young husband was killed in a car crash on his way home from work. Rev. Willimon rushed over to offer help to the young woman who was filled with grief and anger at God over what had happened. Try as he might, and as members of the church tried in the days that followed, there was little to comfort to offer in response to her grief. Willimon wrote: "The coming days were hard for her, particularly hard I thought because she...well, **she didn't have enough oil for her lamp**. I wanted, while sitting on that sofa, to give her some oil. I wanted to speak to her in a way that Christ could be helpful to her. I tried. But I think in the end I failed."³

We need faith to make our way through life.

So, how do we get oil for our lamps? I don't think faith is something we can get it all at once. Faith is something that grows in us, over time.

- We need regular doses of it, kind of like getting a vaccine against disease, in order to build up immunity against fear and doubt.
- We need constant contact with God's word to build up our supply of faith so that when hard times come, we can draw on that faith to sustain us.
- And we need to be in community, living with other people of faith, many of whom have faced the same challenges we will face. We need to draw from each other as we all draw together from the deep well of faith God provides, to have enough oil for our lamps.

How do we get oil for our lamps? In short, we get it through our relationship with Jesus Christ and our lived experiences in the world.

I'll close with one more passage from Will Willimon:

As a pastor, I listen to people talk about their faith as they are dying, or as they are going through some threatening time, and I hope that they might say, "You know, you said something in a sermon last week that really touched me and..."

They hardly ever say that! More typical is for them to say, "Back when I was in college in a campus Bible study group I remember hearing that..." Or "When I was a little girl, some person told me in Sunday school something I've always remembered..." See? They were getting oil for their lamps.⁴

Beloved, I pray you are getting oil for your lamps. May the God of Life and Grace supply you fully with the faith you need in abundance, so that you are prepared, for all that life brings you.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

² John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, (London: Epworth Press, 1976,) 117-118.

³ Will Willimon, *Will Willimon's Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year A, Part 2*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 258-259.

⁴ Willimon, 260.