

November 9, 2014
Third Sunday before Advent – Lectionary 32a
Matthew 25:1-13
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READY OR NOT



Do you ever wake up from a dream in a panic? Maybe you are a teacher and you have no lesson plans. You are an attorney with no closing argument. You are a new parent and the baby's room is not ready. You are an actor who doesn't have your lines memorized.

My classic "not ready" dream is the night of the Easter Vigil. I come to church about 6:00 pm and nothing is prepared. The church isn't decorated. The readers are not chosen or rehearsed. The oil candles are not filled. Stacks of junk and stuff is everywhere—on and around the altar. And there are already three or four dozen people sitting in the pews. It is very disconcerting, and those of you who know me, probably can imagine why. So I start going out into the pews and recruiting anyone I can find to help arrange, clean, put things together.

There is a wake-up scene in the gospel parable. It is startling as well. The ten bridesmaids are waiting for the groom to arrive. They will then join the wedding procession as it moves to the feast. After a delay, all ten become drowsy and fall asleep. But at midnight comes the cry: ready or not, here comes the groom! Wake, awake, for night is flying.

Five are wise. Their lamps are brimmed with oil. They are ready.

Five are foolish. Like most of us, they procrastinate. They thought they had plenty of time. They thought they could borrow oil from their friends.

To our ears it seems unfair that the wise did not share their oil with the foolish. It has a nightmarish quality. The door is shut. And the foolish ones are denied entrance.

Yet wisdom doesn't work that way. Wisdom can't live off someone else's faith or life experience. Martin Luther once said: "You are going to die alone. You had better believe alone."



We know the annoying sound of an alarm. A fire alarm. A disaster alarm. Yet we practice. We have drills. We get ready for emergencies.

Be prepared. Ready or not, nothing lasts forever. Don't let the door shut on you. As troubling as these messages are, like a nightmare, they get our attention. They wake us up to see what's going on inside us and outside us.

We hear this parable in the final weeks of the church year. Time is running out. Light is running out.

Are we running out of oil? Out of energy? Out of steam? Out of hope? Hope for our country, our church, our earth?

Unlike the bridesmaids who become drowsy and nod off, many of us have trouble sleeping. One writer suggests it may be about regrets. Late at night when things are quiet and our lives pass before us, we face our missed opportunities.

And it usually turns us outward. Go buy some more oil. Go buy something, some gadget, some material possession. Maybe that will distract us from what is really going on.

Here's the question: do we have spiritual reserves to meet the unexpected twists and turns of life? Do we have a supply of oil? Are we prepared?

Plan Future

We seek financial advice to prepare us for retirement, for the future, to make sure we will have what we need. We are told to prudently save and invest. But all those outer things can be so fleeting. Do we also pay attention and prepare spiritually, prepare inwardly for what life may bring?

After one man's dad died of a massive coronary he said: "I feel like all my life I have been preparing for this, the worst day of my life. Sitting in church. Listening to sermons. Meditating. Reflecting on what matters and how life can change in an instant. Now I am reaching deep down to draw on these spiritual reserves."

The oil of baptism. Spiritual reserves, if you will. With oil, we are marked with the cross of Christ forever. Deep peace when we wake up in the middle of the night. Preparing us for life's deep joy and sorrow. Oil: the Holy Spirit. Oil: God's promise. Oil: God's covenant.

In these parables at the end of the church year, Jesus seems to be preparing the disciples for the trauma of his own death. Or for the persecution and troubles that await them. Paul, too, is comforting those who are concerned about what happens after death. Do not grieve as those without hope, he tells them.



Do you remember dress rehearsals for a concert or a play? Our liturgy each week is a dress rehearsal. We are practicing. We are getting ready. We keep our lamps trimmed and burning. Ready to meet Christ when he comes. When he comes at this table. When he comes at our death. When he comes at the end of time.

The bridegroom comes. The feast awaits. This feast is everything.

Whether we are ready or not. Whether we panic in the night. Whether at watch or asleep. Christ comes. Let us go out to meet him.