



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 27 (A)

Be Prepared to Wait

[RCL] Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

At first listen, this parable sounds like something any Scout or guide could have told us: Always be prepared. Plan ahead. Bring enough oil. Keep extra batteries on hand. Know where the candles and matches are before the power goes out. Be prepared.

As good as that advice is, there's more to it than that. It's not just, "Always be prepared," but "Be prepared to wait." And not just, "Be prepared to wait," but "Be prepared to wait for the Lord."

How are you at waiting?

It can be hard to wait. "Your call is important to us. Please continue to hold." "Take a number and have a seat until you are called." "If you haven't received your test results in two weeks, contact our office." "The next available appointment is in six months." Has your blood pressure just gone up? People who study these things say in North America, as opposed to other places in the world, we tend to see time as our own individual possession and our scarcest resource. If time is passing and we're not producing something, we're wasting time. If we aren't getting something valuable in exchange for the time we're spending, then someone is wasting our time. We are afraid of pauses, unexpected interruptions to our plans, and boredom. People can tell us that some things just take time, that there are things you can't rush, that a caterpillar needs time in its cocoon to become a butterfly, and we can nod. Sure. That's nice, but we are more complicated than caterpillars and they don't have better things to do or a choice in the matter.

We're not always good at waiting.

The parable Jesus tells is about a wedding feast and waiting.

In Jesus' day, a wedding ceremony would usually be held in the bride's family home. The wedding feast afterward would be held in the groom's family home and would start at night. It lasted about a week, not just one night, so a lot of preparation had to be done.

When the feast was set to begin, the groom would come get his bride, and together they would walk to the wedding banquet with the bridesmaids, who had one job: accompany the bride and groom to the banquet, holding lamps to light the way for them to walk to the feast. That's it. Provide the light. Remember, in those days, there are no streetlights, there is no electricity, no headlights. These lamp-bearing bridesmaids aren't decorative. They have just one job, but it's important: bring the light. Get the bride and the groom safely through the dark and to the big feast.

Except, in the parable, only half of the bridesmaids were prepared to wait for the bridegroom. The other five weren't. So, when the moment comes, they're off at the all-night oil store trying to get a refill for their lamps. Eventually, they do, but by the time they arrive, the party has started, the door has been locked, and for those five bridesmaids, it's a case of too little, too late.

In church tradition and biblical language, the bridegroom is a symbol of Christ, and the bridegroom's arrival, a symbol of the Second Coming of Christ, when he will bring the faithful to the heavenly banquet, a great feast, a party that will last not just a week, but for eternity.

We're still waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. Whether we're waiting for the Second Coming of the Lord, waiting to meet our Lord when we die, waiting for the Lord to come to us with the help we need, the answer we're praying for, the comfort we're looking for, we are still waiting. How are you at waiting?

Sometimes we have the tendency to treat God like the attendant at a fast-food drive-through:

Lord, I'll take two breakfast sandwiches with bacon, a medium coffee, and some of those delicious fries.

Thank you for your order, says the Lord. Would you like cream with your coffee?

Oh, yeah, that would be nice.

Great. And because I am the Lord, your order is free of charge. Please drive around.

It doesn't work that way, does it?

Be prepared to wait, says the Lord.

We don't like waiting, but God promises us blessings even as we wait. We hear in Lamentations 3:25, "The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." God says in Isaiah 40:31, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Waiting is not doing nothing, and having to wait for the Lord doesn't mean the Lord is doing nothing. We can wait, trusting that God is always doing something. God is not helping another customer while we

languish in line. God is always at work, doing “far more than we can ask or imagine,” according to Ephesians 3:20. We hear the whole verse in Morning and Evening Prayer. “Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.” *Whose power, working in us!* We get to participate in what God is already doing, the purposes of God that are already underway. We can be ready, like wise bridesmaids with our one job of bringing the light, or we can be fools, untrusting, unaware, unprepared to do our part.

We may need to wait in order to become aware of what God is doing. We may have to wait through the dark night, or many dark nights, while God is preparing the feast for us, preparing to greet us, to welcome us, to say, “Here I am, let’s go into the feast together.”

Waiting doesn’t mean inactivity. Having oil at the ready, being prepared, comes from doing what we’re told to do, being obedient to God, being formed by God’s power at work in us. So, how do we keep this oil on hand? By some practices and disciplines that are the same for all of us—prayer, reading the Scriptures, sharing fellowship and worship with other Christians, caring for people and the planet. And some of it’s probably a specialty oil blend: it’s spending time with family, it’s looking at nature’s beauty, it’s listening to or making music, it’s knitting, it’s marching, it’s writing, it’s baking, it’s building. It’s using what God gives us to keep us going, to recharge, to stay connected with God and God’s love.

And yes, it can run out. It does if we don’t refill and refuel. You know this. If you don’t have a conversation with your spouse that isn’t about paying the bills or scheduling car maintenance, your marriage is going to get pretty dry. If you don’t spend time with your friends and children and grandchildren, you’ll become strangers. If you don’t know some words of worship and scripture so well they become part of your bones, then someday you’re going to be sitting alone with nothing to draw on when your own words fail.

Do you see why the wise bridesmaids can’t just share their oil? Yes, sharing is a Christian virtue, but some things just don’t work that way. Your friend has a marvelous marriage. There’s no way to borrow some of that. Another has a vibrant and sustaining prayer life. Yes, she can pray for you, but she can’t take your place in a friendship with God. You can be influenced or inspired by someone else’s peace of mind and confident trust in the Lord, but they can’t just give you some of theirs. We have to get that oil for ourselves.

And yes, as much as we don’t like it, time does run out. You can’t say forever, “Someday I’ll spend time with my children, my spouse.” “Someday I’ll get back to church, back to reading the Bible, back to praying.” “Someday I’ll stand outside and breathe deeply and say a prayer of thanks to God.” “Someday I’ll make that phone call, write that letter, make that donation, roll up my sleeves, and help.” Or, really, we can say it all we want, but someday, there will be a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”

There is such a thing as too little, too late. We don’t like it, but there it is.

But here is the good news: we're still here. We're still here, hearing this parable. It is not too late. And remember, it's a party Jesus wants to take us to. He's preparing a great feast for us. Whether it's the great banquet feast of heaven, or the smaller celebrations of spending time with our Lord all along the journey there, we don't want to miss it. And more good news: Jesus is not just the thrower of the party. He's not just the bridegroom. He's the oil dealer too, ready to fill your flask. Just ask. For yourself.

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