

LECTIONARY 32 A

November 12, 2023

Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Grace and peace to you, from our God... Father, Son and Spirit.

My dad was a great planner. He knew exactly how many minutes it took to drive to the train station each workday morning...and how many additional minutes it took to find a parking spot in busy Brooklyn, New York.

He knew how many hours it took to drive from New York to Massachusetts to visit at varying times of the day...and how many quarters he would need for the tolls...thank goodness Easy Pass eliminated that problem!

He knew how many gallons of gas it would take to avoid stopping on the highway where the prices were always high and the lines were long. He knew to the decimal point, because he had a little notebook in the visor of the car in which he recorded the mileage every time he filled up and the gallons used, with notes in the margins to explain possible deviations, like stop and go traffic on the Long Island Expressway or that unforecasted downpour that decreased visibility and speed.

He could add up the grocery cost before the clerk hit total on the register back in the pre-digital scanning era, and had all his coupons cut out and exact change ready.

And when it came to planning a party there were no surprises: enough food, enough beverages and always within budget.

Some of those bridesmaids in today's parable could have used a smidgeon of Dad's organizational skills.

In the days before "The Knot" with its multi- page check lists ...before the advent of the wedding planner or the destination wedding...before amazon.com and same day delivery, wedding planning was a different animal.

Picture yourself back before street lights...

back to a time when weddings involved the entire community of both bride and groom and the joining of two families, two households, and even two villages...

back to a tradition in which the groom traveled to claim the bride, and his kinsmen and friends followed for the party at the bride's home, traveling on dusty roads lit only by moonlight....

back to a time when those sometimes many days of travel were followed by many more days of celebration, with bride and groom in attendance: a community honeymoon, so to speak, with the families celebrating with the new couple before they returned to the home of the groom to begin their new life together as part of that family.

A wedding was the visible expression of the communal unit that meant survival and prosperity for all of them together from one generation to the next.

A big celebration indeed...one to look forward to...one to prepare for...one not to be missed.

So, of course, in his continuing use of story parables set in familiar situations like harvesting fields, or traveling the roads of Samaria, or hiring laborers, Jesus makes a village wedding his next site. Like the others, this too will offer a glance as to what the kingdom of God will look like

We've been through enough of these parables in recent weeks to know that the unraveling of the story is not as "cut and dried" as it may seem at first glance...and in fact, parables raise even more questions than they answer.

The pattern is simple: a familiar situation...an exaggerated problem...an unexpected twist. Just as we the listener are sure we know what will happen and how someone...someone *else* ... will get their comeuppance...things take an unexpected turn, and *we* end up getting stung...or at least our traditional ideas do. Like the day the car gets a flat or road construction adds a 10 mile detour or an extra person shows up for dinner, those best laid plans as Scottish poet Robert Burns might say "oft gang a-glee".

Oops! The prodigal son gets a party. The bad guy Samaritan turns out to be a better caretaker than the priest. The manager who uses creative accounting to let the boss' debtors off the hook, gets praised. Somehow Jesus sees right through our hard-hearted tendency to follow the letter of the law and miss the point of it. He honors forgiveness and praises mercy. He welcomes the riff raff and chastises the well off. He challenges the status quo...and there are always consequences: the foolish ones are tossed out, uninvited, sent away.

We squirm as we recognize that we ourselves might just be those foolish ones.

Today, we see once again that the obvious point is not so obvious.

The question is not, *who stayed awake?* After all, they all fell asleep!

The question is not, *who's got oil?* They all had some and were prepared for the usual wait if not the delay.

The question really is, *how do you wait for the day of the Lord? What makes you ready?*

I don't know anyone who likes to wait. Lines in the supermarket....a delayed train...red traffic lights. I know I am back in NY when I get off the highway, approach the first traffic light in that ever long line of cars in the city, and the guy six cars back from the light leans on the horn as soon as it turns green....or even before, in the split second when the crossing street light turns red!

We tap our foot waiting for the ATM to deliver...and drum our fingers as that little circle goes round and round on the Xfinity home page. We pace outside waiting rooms and ticket counters, and when our number at the deli says 10 and the person being served is #5 and is buying enough cold cuts to feed an army we are beside ourselves

And these are not the serious things: the doctor's report of test results...the very overdue teenager out with the car...the call back from the job interview...the heartbreak that doesn't seem to heal...the empty nest... or the grief that surrounds the death of a loved one...there is a lot of hard waiting in this life.

It is this hard waiting that the community waiting for a messiah experienced, and the hope that perhaps Jesus' is the one is soon to be dashed in the courts of Pontius Pilate.

It is this hard waiting that Jesus is experiencing as he moves ever closer to the cross, with the knowledge that he will be betrayed and abandoned at least temporarily by his followers.

It is this hard waiting that Matthew's community is experiencing as he writes the gospel some 40 years later, and Jesus has not yet returned as promised...a return they expected during their lifetime .

And, although we probably don't think about it much...except maybe when one of those apocalyptical, end times movies comes out... we are still waiting for that return. For despite all the attempts over all these centuries to decode the bible and consult signs and interpret oracles, we haven't gotten any clearer picture of God's time schedule.

What we do know is that he will return and we will see him. And whether Christ comes first or we return to Christ first, the bridesmaids' question is our question too: *how are we to wait? How do we keep our lamps trimmed and burning?*

We have been washed in the water of baptism and marked with the cross of Christ. Our lamps have been lit and we are sent shining into life to reflect God's glory and taste his promise of eternal life even now.

Perhaps we trim those wicks with the words of God, shaping them with the scriptures and the life of Jesus and the traditions handed to us through the ages from the first followers.

Perhaps we notice that we are already are filled with the oil of faith....and we nourish and replenish it often at the communion table and in prayer and in bible study and in congregational life together.

Maybe we leave this gathering and pour it out in acts of kindness and service to others, not because someone is looking or keeping score but because someone is hurting....and we discover that the oil well of faith doesn't seem to run dry.

Maybe we shine our lamps into the darkest corners of the world we live in, lighting the way with honesty and mercy and peace where we more often see fraud and abuse and fighting.

Like those foolish and forgetful maidens in the parable, it is all too easy to get caught up in the surface excitement ... to dress up and run full speed ahead to the party...and then burn out all too quickly.

Like those foolish and forgetful maidens, we may wake up in a panic and run after solutions that take us away from God...or we may wake up too late, finding ourselves in too dark a place, rock bottom, unable to see a path out.

There is a sober reminder in this text that our time, our earthly time, will indeed end. And there are some things that no one else can do for us: we need to let God open our eyes so that we can see and our ears so we can listen. It is with urgency that God calls out to us to come...come to the feast, come to the celebration. It is with great love that God offers the tools and the fuel to get ready...to see the light ahead.

As I said, I learned a lot of my organizing skills from my dad, although sticky notes and computerized lists have replaced his little notebook. But I also learned why he was so prepared. His preparations allowed him maximum time for the true tasks at hand: a job well done, grandparents assisted, children cherished, neighbors helped, church supported. He also showed me what one does when the wait is over: when the car arrived at the destination or when the party began, Dad was the first one to greet the guests and the last one to say goodnight. He danced with his daughters (and his granddaughters) and sang around the piano with his cousins. He enjoyed the meal, talked to everyone, and then cleaned up the dishes with my mom afterwards. And when a glitch appeared...some missing ingredient, some broken glass, some less than stellar meal...he picked up the pieces and worked around it.

It is, after all, not what we do that makes us party ready. It is who we are: much loved children of God. Our Father God is the one who fills our lamps...and the one who picks up the pieces when we are broken. It doesn't take much trimming to rekindle even the

most flickering of lights. And it doesn't take very much oil to keep a lamp burning for a long time. In fact, it takes no more than the small amount that marked your forehead at baptism, especially if you remember to let your light shine before others and show forth the glory of God. And we can sing, praise and bless the Lord even now, as we live into God's promises and share the good news with others.

Each person's little bit goes a long way. Five lamps can light a very dark path...ten can make it seem almost like daytime...and a congregation full is truly and abundantly fruitful...and just what Jesus had in mind.

Amen.