



## Sermon for Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Easter, Nov. 12, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

Ian Hicks

**Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25    1 Thessalonians 4:13-18    Matthew 25: 1-13**

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of *your* faithful and *kindle* in us the fire of *your* love.

August 21 this year saw lives shattered, havoc and distress in Medical Lake, just a short drive away from here. More than 10,000 acres burned, and some 250 homes were destroyed. As part of the Disaster Aid clean up team, 2 people I met lost everything. I have their permission to use their names and their stories.

Clean up began at Don's home. He shared that his wife was away visiting their daughter, and he was having lunch across the street with neighbors, when they received a telephone call saying those haunting and dreaded words: "get out now, evacuate!" Don ran back into his home and grabbed medications a couple shirts and pants and left. They hadn't prepared to evacuate, despite the fires in the area and the high winds.

They weren't prepared to evacuate.

He subsequently described the bureaucracy he had to deal with, both at city level and with the insurance company. He and his wife were expected to account for every single item they had lost, as demanded by the insurance company. Fortunately, he did have such a list. In this instance, they were prepared - they had that list.

Don's next-door neighbor, Dale had a different experience.

Dale and his girlfriend were well prepared to evacuate, with three chests packed with selected personal stuff ready to go. That morning they went for a short drive to Airway Heights for groceries. While there, the feared text message came through: "Evacuate immediately"! They couldn't get back to the house in time to collect the chests. The fire roared through rapidly and the house and chests burned, leaving only ashes. They were prepared to evacuate but couldn't get back in time to collect their planned belongings. When the insurance company demanded a list of everything, Dale was not prepared – he hadn't created that list.

- 1) Archbishop Rowan Atkins at St. Philip's Cathedral Birmingham, Sunday 16, November 2008
- 2) Rev. Randolph Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral said on Nov 8, 2020
- 3) Rev Ron Rolheiser on September 28, 2008, "Struggling with our own inadequacy," <https://ronrolheiser.com>
- 4) Rabbi Eliezer as quoted by Alyce Mckenzie in October 2011 in "Bridesmaids, The Time is Now: Reflections on Mathew 25, 1-12," Patheos.com (Paragraph on the Rabbi from myjewishlearning.com)
- 5) The Rev Debbie Thomas posted "The Story of the Bridesmaids" on November 1, 2020, on Journey with Jesus
- 6) Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way* (pages 246-247)

When we asked him what he missed most after the fire his answer was “our photographs. All those memories. And my girlfriend has been pushing me to store them in the cloud. I procrastinated. And now...” his eyes misted over, and we simply maintained a quiet companionship and listened.

If the Kingdom is now, how do we like it?

Today’s Gospel reading is well- known to all of us. A simple message it seems: Be Prepared.

Hmmm, easy to say, but what does this mean to each of us?

Is the message of today’s gospel really that simple?

How does preparation apply to me?

How much preparedness is needed?

What am I preparing for?

What is the context now?

Let’s pause for a moment. There’s practical preparedness, which may help us live more comfortably day by day.

For example: How many of us have made a list of things to pack for a trip? And then still forgotten something, even though we prepared? Raise your hands.

How many times have we prepared a grocery shopping list, arrived at the store, and found we left the list at home? Or how many times have we got home and found that even with the list, we forgot something? Were we prepared to take an extra couple of minutes to double check before leaving either home or the store?

How many times have you thought of some important questions to ask your doctor at your next appointment, but didn’t write them down? Or how often have we said something to ourselves like “these are important, I won’t forget.” And then forgotten some of them! If only we had prepared that list!

Preparedness – being prepared, it’s a perpetually ongoing process - truly endless. Both daily and for life in the next world.

- 1) Archbishop Rowan Atkins at St. Philip’s Cathedral Birmingham, Sunday 16, November 2008
- 2) Rev. Randolph Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral said on Nov 8, 2020
- 3) Rev Ron Rolheiser on September 28, 2008, “Struggling with our own inadequacy,” <https://ronrolheiser.com>
- 4) Rabbi Eliezer as quoted by Alyce Mckenzie in October 2011 in “Bridesmaids, The Time is Now: Reflections on Mathew 25, 1-12,” Patheos.com (Paragraph on the Rabbi from myjewishlearning.com)
- 5) The Rev Debbie Thomas posted “The Story of the Bridesmaids” on November 1, 2020, on Journey with Jesus
- 6) Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way* (pages 246-247)

And so, what has all of this got to do with today's readings, especially in the context of the parable of the 10 maidens with lamps, waiting for the bridegroom and party to arrive – 5 with extra oil and 5 without.

How about stopping and taking a few moments to chill and think of what we should do. Are we ready? This may mean physically where the "bridegroom" could be a fire, or it could be a party! Or it could be we have exceptionally busy lives, swirling politics, news, and disinformation, possibly some family members making exceptional challenging demands. How do we prepare? Psalm 46, vs 10 "Be still and know that I am God." We need some time to simply stop, breathe deeply, offer a prayer, and listen. Listen for God's feedback. It could be as simple as making tea or coffee and thinking carefully about right actions. Planning. Listen for God's feedback.

In today's gospel, we are advised: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." When things might change dramatically for us. We are exhorted by Mathew (in chapter 24) to "Hold yourself ready, therefore, because the Son of Man will come when you least expect Him."

A few years back, former Archbishop Rowan Atkins preaching at the Birmingham Cathedral provided a more traditional comment about today's gospel: "Now the parable of the lazy bridesmaids who let their lamps go out because they've dozed off while waiting for the bridegroom to arrive is a parable about what St. Paul reminds us (of in the readings today) – keeping awake. Keep on the watch; keep your eyes open. You never know when the glory of the Lord is going to blaze on the world so keep your eyes open. You might just miss it; and if you miss it, you're in trouble."<sup>1</sup>

More recently the Rev. Randolph Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral provided more insight into our expected thoughts and actions: "We must be wise and do the same thing. Between now and the return of our Lord, it's up to us to keep the lamps trimmed and full, full of what St Paul describes as the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Each of us in our own way, from wherever we are in life, has to shine the light of Christ's love and forgiveness across our strained and divided nation..."<sup>2</sup>

1) Archbishop Rowan Atkins at St. Philip's Cathedral Birmingham, Sunday 16, November 2008

2) Rev. Randolph Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral said on Nov 8, 2020

3) Rev Ron Rolheiser on September 28, 2008, "Struggling with our own inadequacy," <https://ronrolheiser.com>

4) Rabbi Eliezer as quoted by Alyce Mckenzie in October 2011 in "Bridesmaids, The Time is Now: Reflections on Mathew 25, 1-12," Patheos.com (Paragraph on the Rabbi from myjewishlearning.com)

5) The Rev Debbie Thomas posted "The Story of the Bridesmaids" on November 1, 2020, on Journey with Jesus

6) Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way* (pages 246-247)

The Rev Ron Rolheiser provides a relevant and more personal perspective when he commented that he constantly catches himself out in his human failings. Of the 10 bridesmaids he wrote “I take consolation from the gospel parable... , while waiting for the bridegroom, all fell asleep, wise and foolish alike. Even the wise were too human and too weak to stay awake the whole time. Nobody does it perfectly and accepting this, our congenital inadequacy (human condition), *can bring us to a healthy humility and perhaps even a healthy humor about it.*”<sup>3</sup>

Humor? There’s humor in the message? Well yes there certainly can be if it’s a way of getting the message across. Rabbi Eliezer\* taught his disciples, “Repent one day before your death.” One of them asked, “How will we know when that day is?” To which he replied, “All the more reason to repent today, lest you die tomorrow.”<sup>4</sup>

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote: “About dates and times my friends we need not write to you, for you know perfectly well that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night. Like it or not, we may well be surprised.” (1 Thessalonians 5:2) Like it or not we may be surprised.

Paul further encourages us to help those who are struggling to prepare: “And we would urge you, brothers, to admonish the careless, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, and be very patient with them all.” (1 Thessalonians 5: 14) Are we prepared to be patient? How can we help?

The Rev Debbie Thomas when preaching on today’s gospel provides us yet a different interpretation, in which she was one of those pushy, inquisitive children that can really try our patience when we are tired. She annoyed her Sunday School teacher by asking all the wrong questions about the story, like:

“Why are the “wise” bridesmaids stingy and mean?

Why didn’t the groom show up until midnight?

Why did the bride put up with the delay?

She went on to comment that these questions still bother her! But she goes on to point out that the parable *ends with a wedding – celebration and joy.* “We dare not abandon this glorious ending

1) Archbishop Rowan Atkins at St. Philip’s Cathedral Birmingham, Sunday 16, November 2008

2) Rev. Randolph Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral said on Nov 8, 2020

3) Rev Ron Rolheiser on September 28, 2008, “Struggling with our own inadequacy,” <https://ronrolheiser.com>

4) Rabbi Eliezer as quoted by Alyce Mckenzie in October 2011 in “Bridesmaids, The Time is Now: Reflections on Mathew 25, 1-12,” Patheos.com (Paragraph on the Rabbi from myjewishlearning.com)

5) The Rev Debbie Thomas posted “The Story of the Bridesmaids” on November 1, 2020, on Journey with Jesus

6) Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way* (pages 246-247)

simply because we've grown tired of waiting. Things may not go the way we think they're going to go." We will have to adapt to the circumstances. But perhaps the lesson of this parable is "not to allow our fear or sense of inadequacy to keep you away from the party". The groom delights in **you** – not your lamp. God created light. God is light. **And Jesus is the light of the world.**<sup>5</sup>

One of my favorite authors, our own Presiding Bishop Curry provides yet further perspective in his book *Love is the Way*, in which he talks about an experience whilst on a pastoral visit to the Southwest. He wrote: "... I noticed a bearded man in casual clothes towering above the others. He had to be at least 6 feet 5. And while everyone was smiling and holding smartphones for their selfies (with me), he was solitary and serious. I couldn't read his expression, but it was clear that he was experiencing the moment differently from those around him. I felt my "danger antennae" twitch but did nothing. (The bishop's "danger antennae were up" but he was prepared to do nothing.)

When he came closer, I could see his eyes. They were somewhat red; was he angry or had he cried?

When he reached me, I was slightly wary, but he immediately extended his large open hand. "I'm so glad that you're my bishop and that you're my brother," he said.

He told me his story. He'd grown up with a father and grandfather who called themselves Christians but were leaders in the Klu Klux Klan. But he had left home for college, then moved to a small town in Arkansas. While there, he wandered into a small Episcopal church in town, even though it was not the church of his upbringing.

He got to know the people and they got to know him and eventually his family story. "And they loved me anyway." They taught him about a God who loves unconditionally and helped him find the truth of his faith. They healed him. "<sup>6</sup>

This man was prepared to walk into a church. The community were prepared to accept him unconditionally. He was prepared to share his story. And our God is prepared to love him unconditionally.

Simply put, I interpret this man as letting his humanity show. Bishop Curry let his humanity shine. We are constantly confronted with the challenges of accepting people around us as being more human. It is difficult sometimes. There are those within our community who are forgotten. There

1) Archbishop Rowan Atkins at St. Philip's Cathedral Birmingham, Sunday 16, November 2008

2) Rev. Randolph Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral said on Nov 8, 2020

3) Rev Ron Rolheiser on September 28, 2008, "Struggling with our own inadequacy," <https://ronrolheiser.com>

4) Rabbi Eliezer as quoted by Alyce Mckenzie in October 2011 in "Bridesmaids, The Time is Now: Reflections on Mathew 25, 1-12," [Patheos.com](http://Patheos.com) (Paragraph on the Rabbi from [myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com))

5) The Rev Debbie Thomas posted "The Story of the Bridesmaids" on November 1, 2020, on *Journey with Jesus*

6) Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way* (pages 246-247)

are those who face tremendous health burdens. There are those facing horrendous wars in the Middle East, Sudan, and other regions. We must continually work on being human, being prepared to be human. Maybe this is an aspect of the parable Jesus invites us to as part of the parable: let our humanity shine.

Thank goodness we have prayer and the Eucharist to help guide us through the machinations of life! One author describes the Eucharist as “a vigil of waiting.” So, where does this put us now? What are we supposed to do with all these experiences we’ve heard?

Archbishop Rowan Atkins summarizes it simply for us:

“Keep your eyes open, don't be afraid - and what you'll find you're doing is serving Jesus. And that's not a bad summary to the challenge of Christian life.

Keep your eyes open, don't get lazy about what you let yourself see.

Keep your eyes open to need, to suffering and to joy and glory.

Keep your eyes open – and your ears too, to where the cry of need arises; to where the crisis comes. Then don't be afraid. Make the relationships that will allow humanity to come alive where those needs are. And then when you have to answer for yourself at the judgement, you'll discover perhaps rather to your surprise that you have been working with Jesus, and for Jesus.”

May the Peace of our Lord be with us all. Amen

(\*Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (C.40-120 CE) was one of the five most distinguished disciples of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, later to become one of the leading rabbinic figures of his day and teacher of Rabbi Akiba. The Mishnah records around 300 laws in the name of Rabbi Eliezer. The difficulty to be faced in attempting to reconstruct the life of Rabbi Eliezer is that he is, like all the other early rabbinic figures, a hero of Jewish legend, from which it is far from easy to disentangle the facts.) “The Mishnah is regarded as one of the most significant Jewish texts since it is a written collection of oral knowledge that can be found within the Talmud, or the central text that is the nucleus of Jewish religious authority.”

- 1) Archbishop Rowan Atkins at St. Philip’s Cathedral Birmingham, Sunday 16, November 2008
- 2) Rev. Randolph Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral said on Nov 8, 2020
- 3) Rev Ron Rolheiser on September 28, 2008, “Struggling with our own inadequacy,” <https://ronrolheiser.com>
- 4) Rabbi Eliezer as quoted by Alyce Mckenzie in October 2011 in “Bridesmaids, The Time is Now: Reflections on Mathew 25, 1-12,” Patheos.com (Paragraph on the Rabbi from myjewishlearning.com)
- 5) The Rev Debbie Thomas posted “The Story of the Bridesmaids” on November 1, 2020, on Journey with Jesus
- 6) Bishop Michael Curry, Love is the Way (pages 246-247)