



## Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Nov. 2020

### You Know Neither the Day nor the Hour

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Glenda Empsall

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

Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.

The Bible is a rich source of guidance for addressing many of our anxieties, including the transfer of power from one leader to another. Moses seemed irreplaceable. Yet, after he died, the Israelites wept until the period of mourning ended. Moses had passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua, who began his speech to all the tribes of Israel by recounting their common ancestry from Terah through Abraham and Nahor and reminding them of all that God had done for them. With this line, "... as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Joshua led by example, telling the tribes, "... put away foreign gods ... incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." By pledging to serve and obey The One God, the Israelites committed not only themselves but all subsequent generations to a covenant with God!

This 'history' lesson relates to today's Gospel because marriages were arranged by the respective male relatives of the bride and groom in order to retain wealth and property within the family. Abraham sent his servant to his kinsman Nahor to find a wife for Isaac and Isaac married Rebecca. [Genesis 24] Their younger son Jacob was sent to "take a wife from the daughters of Laban," who was Rebecca's brother. It's complicated. Jacob married Leah and Rachel [Genesis 29] and Jacob's offspring [including four from concubines] became patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Make a leap of faith with me now! A friend sent me a series of "Billboards from God." One of them reads "Loved the wedding. Now invite me to the marriage." and I reflected on the differences. A wedding is an event. Marriage is a commitment. Weddings in Jesus' time and place were week-long events, with abundant dining and drinking, hosted at the groom's or the groom's parents' house. Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine, was at a wedding in Cana of Galilee [John 2:1-2]. Four weeks ago, we heard, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." The story ends with an improperly dressed guest being bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness, "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." [Mt 22:1-14]

In this week's Gospel Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise." Wisdom is often equated with knowledge or education, discipline and righteousness; foolishness with ignorance, recklessness and immorality. But I don't think categorizing people as 'wise' or 'foolish' is that simplistic. Knowledge does not always equal wisdom. People have different access to information, different experiences, different insights, different abilities. If one can learn from mistakes, whether made by themselves or by others, perhaps that is the beginning of wisdom.

The Spark Story Bible we sometimes use in The Well/Jordan says, "Jesus told a story about getting ready." That made me think of the Scout Motto, "Be prepared!" When someone asked Scouting founder Robert Baden-Powell "Prepared for what?" he replied, "Why, for any old thing," In Scouting for Boys, he

wrote that to 'Be Prepared' means "you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty."

Maybe the so-called 'wise' bridesmaids had been to weddings before, anticipated that the bridegroom might be late and took extra oil for themselves. Had they been truly prepared for any possibility, they would have had extra, extra oil to share with any bridesmaid who hadn't brought extra oil. I wonder if this was the first wedding procession for the so-called 'foolish' bridesmaids and they just didn't know any better.

Notice that all ten bridesmaids fell asleep while waiting for the bridegroom. "But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'" I thought it was selfish of the wise not to share their oil, but to be fair, their 'duty' was to meet the bridegroom with their lamps burning brightly. Is it better to have a five-bridesmaid procession with lamps lit, than to have ten bridesmaids with dark lamps?

It seemed illogical to send the five unprepared bridesmaids to buy oil at midnight, but they went and somehow returned with lighted lamps. But by then the procession was over and the door was shut. This is the part in the story that makes me wince, "Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'"

I wince, because at the beginning of the reading, Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this..." and because in this parable and in many other verses in the bible, the 'bridegroom' is Jesus. I wince because other readings, particularly in Matthew's gospel, also include this aspect of denial into the 'kingdom of heaven' for what seem to me to be un-Jesus-like judgement for minor offenses -- e.g.; being improperly attired, being unprepared and therefore 'late' to the party [Note that it was OK for the bridegroom to be 'delayed'] and for offenses that are forgiven elsewhere in the bible. Jesus said, "... whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." [Mt. 10:33]. Yet Peter, who denied Jesus three times, became the 'cornerstone' in the expansion of the kingdom and guardian of the pearly gates.

The point of the parable is not to say who is 'IN' and who is 'OUT.' The point is that if we aren't prepared, if we aren't paying attention, if we don't give it our best shot to fix the problem even when it seems illogical, if we don't knock on the door and ask to be admitted, we will miss something; maybe something important, something wonderful, something unforgettable!

This is my morning prayer, "Thank you, God for bringing me safely to the beginning of this new day, especially since I messed up so badly yesterday. Guide me today to love and serve you and to love and serve my neighbors." I believe we serve a Lord of grace; grace that is given before we ask; whether we are wise or foolish, because regardless of our situation in life in this world, we are beloved children of God, created in God's image, invited and worthy to enter into the kingdom. Pay attention. Be alert. Stay vigilant. And as you are able, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

In the Way of Love; Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest.