

Proper 27 A BCP

Is Your Lamp Filled?

Amos 5:18-24

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

Psalm 70

Holy God, may only your Word be spoken; only your Word heard+. Amen.

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Jesus is preparing his people for the final paradox: the end of his life on earth, which would issue in the new beginning of eternal life with him in heaven. We find him here in the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, only three chapters from the end. We find him here just two days before the last supper; the chief priests and elders have finalized their plans for his arrest and crucifixion; his cross was probably being assembled as he spoke. He knew his day, his hour, was close at hand. He was prepared. And in this parable he is teaching his people to learn from him: he is exhorting us to be prepared:

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

What does it mean in our time to be prepared? Does it mean we have stockpiled all manner of gear and supplies, freeze dried rations and gallons of water? Maybe. Does being prepared mean we have a survival plan for every foreseeable scenario? Maybe. Does it mean we have even scripted out how we might ethically deal with all those who didn’t prepare for their own needs? Maybe. There is certainly a multimillion dollar industry rolling right along that deals with this way of approaching preparedness. Is this what Jesus is pointing to? Maybe. But somehow I don’t think so. Although it might look like this on the surface of our parable today with our ten bridesmaids and their oil lamps, I don’t think so.

Our parable today is pointing to a different type of readiness. Jesus is pointing us towards a *personal* preparedness: that preparation of the heart and soul that cannot be shared or lent, no matter how much we might want to. And this need for personal readiness is linked intimately with another hard truth: that we have no control whatsoever over the time or the circumstance in which our preparedness will be required:

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

There are so many ways that we are required to be ready for the unknown, just in an average day. I think of how much I rely on my personal readiness just to be able to deal with the surprises and potential calamities of daily life as an associate rector. Is my heart in a strong and solid place, is my mind clear so that I can trust my good instincts and proceed with love and truthfulness? If I have done my personal preparedness work – and for me that includes prayer and meditation - then yes, with God’s help, I have a good chance of being useful. If, on the other hand, I have allowed the crush of life to seduce me into thinking that other work is more pressing, then no; I will not have the grace or the good humor or the endurance to be an effective disciple of Christ. For me, the

disciplines of prayer and meditation are powerful sources of peace and strength which I rely on to see me through even just an average crazy day of life on earth. Prayer and meditation are the oil in my lamp. They are also my stockpiles of safekeeping, my necessities for survival. I have learned that, without a doubt, I know neither the day nor the hour when I will need to dip into those reserves. I think often about what September 11th required of all the “first responders,” and so every morning when I button on my clerical collar, I pray for the strength to see me through whatever the day will bring. I’d like to tell you about a time when this deep well of preparedness served me well.

Being from the diocese of Maryland, where the formation process for potential priests is notoriously long and rugged, I was required to serve in several very formative internships. Some were parishes, others were not. One was a day-care center for homeless preschoolers. One was the Baltimore City prison system, where I taught Tai Chi and meditation. Another was an inner-city church which had died, but still stood, rotting with damp, in the city streets where the children had nothing but big trouble to get into, no breakfast or lunch during the summer months, and the highest rate of drive-by shootings in Baltimore city, itself the number one murder capital in the nation. My bishop, knowing my passion for the marginalized, asked if I would consider designing a program – any program - for these children, based in this church. It wasn’t long before the Holy Spirit got a hold of this, and with the mantra, “I will, with God’s help” echoing in my head, within a few weeks I had a program, a budget, volunteers, a resident artist, a videographer, and enough donations to feed the children two meals a day. It was clear to me that God had given this idea the Big Thumbs Up.

And so, that summer, we sweated through 110 degree days in the painted-shut, moldy basement of this dead church, working hard together in a children’s theatre project designed to focus on two things: the unique worth of each child, and on the practice of peace-making skills. These children were very practiced in responding quickly and violently - skills to which they owed their lives. What they didn’t have was the knowledge of any other possible response. And so we worked hard to practice responding in new ways – ways that not only didn’t draw blood, but actually fit with Jesus’ mandate to speak the truth, in love. It was an awesome thing to watch these children take on their new practices – to see a young boy check his fist midway to its target of another child’s face, to see him stop himself, take a deep breath, stand tall and say what he needed to say. The weeks went by; backdrops were painted, costumes made, tickets printed, lines memorized. Deep theological questions came up related to our script – questions like what does the voice of God sound like? What color is God’s hand? Why are people so mean? Does God love me? – and the wonder of the Holy Spirit moving in these children’s lives was powerful. But towards the end of the summer, I discovered that one of my little 7 year old girls – the littlest and most violent one in the bunch, the one with the oldest face and the tireddest, meanest eyes - was being sexually molested by her father. Realizing the risk, it was time to practice what I preached. Reporting this abuse to CPS, I was assured of my anonymity, but I knew there would be no safety for me. Within the day I was the target of this raging man, who threatened to track me down and kill me. Knowing the street life of this inner-city, where guns and knives were carried visibly, and

where to “be cut” or “clipped” were not even news, I was in big trouble. And the children, hovering around me, were in trouble too.

The question was, do I close the program, and cancel the 100-seat sold-out show that these kids had worked so hard on all summer to produce, or do I find a safe way to go ahead with their big show? I can tell you, I was so scared that I could barely open the door of my house, viscerally imagining the impact of a bullet shattering my chest.

I spent a lot of time on my knees, praying for God’s protection and guidance. I drew hard on my reserves of strength and faith. All those years of prayer and meditation had created this well of sustenance, and I found that even just the opening physical acts of preparing for meditation and prayer, practiced over so many years, were quick to help: the same body position and breathing techniques that I had shared with the children were the same things that calmed my heart, slowed my breathing, eased my mind. And after again and yet again placing myself in meditation at the feet of God, tucking myself into the shadow of his wing, my knees stopped shaking enough to get up and proceed. I would not let this man win. I loved these children; they had made real progress in learning how beloved they are of God, in practicing what it really takes to declare peace and to “speak the truth in love,” and their play expressed all of this radical and important news. There *were* ways to press on safely – one of which was to hire armed bodyguards. These good men stuck to me like glue, and became so impressed with the children that they donated their services for the final show.

Well, I want you to know that we celebrated their Grand finale to a packed house, where they reveled in their newfound talents, proudly took their bows, and absolutely *radiated* joy. Talk about lamps lit! These are faces I will never forget. I had experienced how it feels to be galvanized by love, and I had experienced what it is to be strengthened and empowered by the deep reserves available through prayer and meditation, to do what I otherwise could not have done. My personal lamp had been prepared, full and ready, for the unknown day when I would need it, and between that and the bizarrely sweet help of armed bodyguards, God made sure that the truth in love was celebrated that night.

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Jesus teaches us to be prepared. How do we keep awake in the presence of the unknown? How do we prepare? Part of our charge as his followers is to accept that God is in control, and that with God’s help we can be at peace, in alignment, with the will of God. We truly do not know either the day or the hour. Another part of our charge is to follow Christ’s teachings, and examples. He teaches us to pray, and to meditate. He teaches that to be his disciple, we are to follow his example of deep inward development of the soul, in order to strengthen us for wide powerful service in the world. Mother Theresa put this juxtaposition between the inward and outward life of the spirit so simply, so beautifully, when she said, “the two halves of a full life in Christ are prayer, and action.” Prayer, and action. Now here is where I could add in some shameless self promotion of things like the meditation classes offered here, and the wonderful opportunities for worship and service that abound here at St. John’s, and which so need your energy and help. Suffice it

to say that we, the clergy and people of St. John's, are here for you, out of love for you, as Christians trying hard to walk faithfully in a world where sometimes the light is hard to see.

Our ten bridesmaids today are ready. At least, they think they are. Some have come prepared. Others come thinking they can rely on the generosity of their friends to lend them something that actually cannot be shared - only personal readiness of the heart will do. We as the church are the bride of Christ, and we hope to be ready for him. But are our lamps full? Are our hearts prepared? Is there a new light of inspiration in your mind and heart that might lead you to a new practice, to a closer walk with our Lord?

Pray. Meditate. Worship. Serve. And find your hearts full, your light bright: a beacon radiating the hope and love and radical reality of God at work in the world. Amen.

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