

FIRST LESSON: Amos 5:18-24
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 25:1-13
November 12, 2023

“What Does Being Ready Mean?”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Nadia Bolz-Weber has gained fame as a progressive and very tattooed Episcopalian priest. She’s written a few books. She still preaches, and I found her sermon on the wise and foolish bridesmaids. While I don’t agree with all of her theological conclusions, I admit that I found her comparison of this parable to a high anxiety nightmare hilarious and relatable. She says it sounds like . . . “I’m supposed to go pick someone important up from the airport like . . . Dolly Parton, but I forget to fill my gas tank and then I’m idling outside baggage claim for so long I doze off and then when Dolly Parton finally texts she’s almost there, my car starts beeping that it’s nearly out of gas *but* then I realize the dude in front of me has a gas can strapped in the back of his monster truck and I ask if he can help me out but he just points to the overpriced gas station outside the airport and in a panic I use the fumes in my tank to get there but then when I’m filling up my Subaru I see Dolly Parton drive off in the passenger side of the dude’s F150 and she doesn’t even return my wave - like she doesn’t even know me.”

Now THAT would be a parable and a half! Jesus gave us several parables about the end times and judgement. The parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids is one of them, and it does seem to involve a lot of stress and anxiety.

Weddings were not the one-day affairs they are in our country. As is still the case in India, weddings could last up to a week. The wedding image is symbolic, but the story is based on real practices. In an actual wedding the processions of the bride and groom were the beginning of the marriage feast. The groom goes to get his bride. The bridesmaids in this case are either waiting at the bride’s home for the groom to come for her or the groom’s family home. It’s evening, so they wait with lamps ready.

The bridegroom is delayed. This was not actually uncommon. Marriages were more business contract than romance. There could be last minute financial negotiations between the families. Since it was not uncommon, the bridesmaids *should* have anticipated the possibility, and half of them did. Half of the bridesmaids brought extra oil for their lamps.

The hour grew late and the bridesmaids fell asleep. All of them fell asleep. That was not the problem. The problem was that once awakened half of them realized that they did not have enough oil to make the whole procession. They were going to run out. They asked the others to give them some, but the more prepared young women refused. This sounds mean spirited, but it is

theoretically possible (this is a story, after all) that had they given them some of their oil no one would have had enough, and instead of a lighted procession the bridegroom would have walked in darkness. Both groups knew that the bridegroom was coming and waited with lamps burning. Only half of them realized that the darkness might last longer than they hoped and were prepared for it.

In the end the foolish bridesmaids were able to buy oil in the middle of the night and turned up at the house to be let into the banquet. There they were turned away. “Lord, Lord,” they said, “open the door for us!” But the bridegroom replied, “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.”

We don’t like this ending at all. It sounds very harsh to us. But the real question is, what is the oil? This is a symbolic story. The wedding banquet is the kingdom of heaven. The bridegroom is Jesus. And falling asleep was not the problem. The issue appears to be that half of the bridesmaids did not anticipate such a long wait and did not have the oil to keep going. They ran out. There is a judgment here, and the judgment is against those who lack oil because they were not prepared for a long night in darkness.

As Christians we associate the “Day of the Lord” mentioned in Amos with the second coming of Christ and the last judgment, although we have to be careful not to be too literalistic. This “day” is not a 24-hour day. It is an unspecified period of time, sort of like when we say, “when I was younger **back in the day** . . .” Amos says, “Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord!” He brings biting criticism to a popular teaching of his time about the day of the Lord, the assumption that it will be a time when God will wreck vengeance on all of the enemies of Israel. **They** will be judged. **They** will be crushed. **They** will be destroyed, and Israel will be delivered and given all good things. Amos, along with the other latter prophets, brought a strong corrective to that idea. The “Day of the Lord” will be a time to put all things right, and that includes correcting God’s people. Israel was not immune to judgment. “Why do you long for the day of the Lord?” says Amos. “That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.”

What brings about this judgement was not lack of religiosity on the part of people. The people of Amos’ time were a very outwardly religious people! But God refused to accept any of their offerings. God was not impressed by the lengthily and elaborate services. God said, “Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. **But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!**” What is lacking is justice and righteousness. What the people say and what the people do does not line up. In the parable’s terms, they don’t have any oil.

I think that it is probably on the safe side to say that today most Americans do not believe that God will judge them for anything. We have gone to the other extreme of the hell fire and brimstone of a previous generation. It’s okay to worship God if it makes you feel better, but God is basically irrelevant to life. God does not punish or reward. God can be disregarded. But this is its own form of magical thinking, because woven into the world God created are

these little things called consequences. There is cause and effect. If we destroy our planet through our greed, selfishness and ignorance, **we will pay for that.** If we destroy our relationships through deceitful behavior, active addiction or rage we will end up alone. At some point we won't be able to keep all the balls up in the air. At some point everything will come crashing down. Judgment will come. It is woven into the very fabric of creation. People can become obsessed the end times and end times prophecies as if what we do and what will happen are not connected. But if we destroy the planet, the result will be a horrendous judgment against humanity. If we engage in all out warfare, the judgment will be unending suffering and destruction. God judges us by allowing the consequences of our actions to unfold. Our hope is in the merciful intervention of God, but God does call us to account for what we do now.

We are living in the "meantime," the time between God sending Jesus into the world and the end of time. In the "meantime" things can get pretty dark. Do we have enough "oil" to make it through the dark times? Oil is faith but it is more than faith. Oil is action but not action alone. Oil is conscience and will, compassion, mercy and self-discipline. Oil brings light. Having oil means working faithfully for God, bringing justice, wholeness and mercy to the world. It means being good stewards of the earth and being generous to those in need. It means welcoming the stranger and clothing the poor. It means loving God and loving our neighbor.

Jesus tells us to be vigilant, because we do not know the day or the hour. We are to be READY. But there are two kinds of being ready. We can be ready to head out the door and leave the house. That's not hard. It doesn't ask much of us. That appears to be the kind of "ready" some Christians are talking about when they talk about the return of Christ. It's as if it is something detached from themselves and the way we live. It will just happen, like a hurricane or tornado. Take shelter and avoid the consequences. You don't know when the storm will hit but have extra food in the house. Or we can be ready to run a marathon. That requires months of discipline and training. That's the type of "ready" that God wants. We are not here to wait passively, but to work actively to bring light into the darkness until the bridegroom comes. Amen.

Amos 5:18-24

18 Woe to you who long
for the day of the Lord!

Why do you long for the day of the Lord?
That day will be darkness, not light.

19 It will be as though a man fled from a lion
only to meet a bear,
as though he entered his house
and rested his hand on the wall
only to have a snake bite him.

- 20** Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light—
pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?
- 21** “I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
- 22** Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
- 23** Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
- 24** But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Matthew 25:1-13

- 25** “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.
- ⁶ “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’
- ⁷ “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’
- ⁹ “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’
- ¹⁰ “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.
- ¹¹ “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’
- ¹² “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’
- ¹³ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.