

Sunday, November 8, 2020

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 27 (Year A)

Joshua 24.1-3a, 14-25; 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18; Matthew 25.1-13

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/384979009360362>

(Sermon begins at about 14:15)

“Keeping Our Lamp Burning”

The readings appointed for the Sundays in November deal with “endings”—as we move toward the conclusion of the liturgical year and prepare for the season of Advent in just a few weeks.

The Old Testament reading from Book of Joshua is part of Joshua’s farewell address to the people of Israel. Moses had led the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promise Land. He was not, however, the one to lead them into the Promised Land. That job fell to Joshua. It was Joshua who oversaw their efforts to take control of the land, as promised by God. Now someone else needs to lead them as they settle in and establish a new life for themselves. As he prepares for his own death, Joshua addresses the people, reminding them of what God has done for them over the last 40 plus years. Reminding them of their covenant with God. Reminding them that they need to keep going. Reminding them that to do that, they must continue to obey God.

The Epistle reading from the First Letter to the Thessalonians provides Paul’s response to members of a newly forming Christian community who are concerned about the end of the ages. About the Second Coming of Christ. They have concerns as to whether those who have already died will be resurrected when Christ does come again. Paul assures them that those who have gone before will indeed be resurrected into the fullness of the glory that Christ has promised for all believers.

And then the Gospel reading from Matthew provides Jesus’ teaching about the need to continually remain vigilant and to be prepared for his Second Coming at the end of the ages. A message that is given during his final week of life, as he awaits his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

The parable we hear today is one of three about the end times, in response to the disciples’ questions of when and what would be the signs of Jesus’ returning at the end of the age (Mt 24.3). The specific details of the story reflect the wedding customs of Palestine at that time. On the day of the wedding—or more appropriately, the date appointed for the wedding contract—the groom would go with some of his friends to take the bride from her family’s home to his own. This usually happened at night. The symbolic act of marriage was the return home of the groom with his bride, and was the beginning of a festive celebration that lasted several days.

Bridesmaids—young women from both families—would attend the bride on this journey. They would wait with lamps to light the way for the bridegroom to make the journey back to his home with his bride. In Jesus’ parable, we hear of ten bridesmaids waiting to accompany the wedding party. For whatever reason, the groom is delayed in arriving, and the lamps

presumably have been burning for some time in anticipation of his arrival. When he finally does arrive, it is apparent that more oil would be needed for the lamps to remain lit throughout the journey back to the groom's home. Five of the bridesmaids are wise and brought extra oil, just in case. But five are foolish. They don't think to bring extra oil. While they go to get the oil they need, the bridegroom comes, gets his bride, and travels back home to begin the celebration. When the five foolish bridesmaids finally get to the groom's home for the celebration, the party is already in full swing and they are not admitted. Harsh, but undoubtedly done for effect to make the point of the parable.

For Matthew's post-Resurrection community, the bridegroom is the Risen Christ, whose return in glory is expected at any time. The wedding imagery suggests that his return would be cause for joyous celebration, not dread and sorrow. But that those who follow Christ must be prepared for his coming at any moment. Because if they have not prepared properly, they will miss out. Or, in other words, waiting until the last minute to prepare for the Second Coming is not sufficient to insure entry into the Kingdom. So, we must prepare now, and stay prepared.

Even so, there was a sense of anxiety about when this would happen. Even though Jesus repeatedly told his followers that we won't know when he would return until it actually happens, the early Church was almost obsessed with its concern about Christ's Second Coming, as evidenced by the disciples questioning of Jesus, and the Thessalonian's concern about who would be included in the resulting resurrection.

In our own time, we do not seem to be so concerned with when the Second Coming will occur. Certainly, some individuals may be, but as a whole, the Church, or at least our branch of it, does not obsess about such concerns. Although I must admit there are days when I say to God, half tongue-in-cheek, "If you're planning on ending things, today would be a good day to get it over with." But the only time we even discuss the Second Coming is when we hear readings such as those from today, at the end of the liturgical year and during Advent. Although, maybe we should spend more time thinking about the Second Coming. Particularly emphasizing the importance of being prepared for that eventuality.

While we don't continually talk about this except at particular times of the year, I like to think we don't talk about—don't obsess about—Jesus' Second Coming because we take Christ's promises to heart. His promises that during this time between his Resurrection and his coming again, he has been busy preparing a place for us in his eternal kingdom. And as a result, we seek to always be prepared so that no matter when Jesus does come again, we are indeed ready.

Our reading from Joshua dovetails nicely with the New Testament readings. While Joshua is not about the end times or the Second Coming, it is about the ongoing life of the community and how they are to continue in their life and ministry together. Namely, that they are to be faithful and obedient to God. Or, as Matthew tells us, to be prepared.

In light of this (pun definitely intended), what does the parable of the ten bridesmaids with their lamps—some burning brightly, and some burned out—mean in our ongoing life of faith? What does it mean to keep our lamps trimmed? What does it mean to have plenty of oil to keep the lamps burning?

As I thought about all of this, my mind and my heart kept being pulled back to the events of the last seven and a half months—a period filled with events that none of us would have anticipated or could have possibly prepared for.

A world-wide pandemic that has resulted in 9.7 million cases and 235,000 deaths nationwide, and has brought about significant economic upheaval. And now, as we turn toward the winter months, we are seeing upticks in the number of cases, threatening the possibility of further shutdowns and economic uncertainty.

Amid this national and global disaster, a government so plagued by partisan politics that it would rather focus on stacking courts than providing much needed economic stimulus and relief.

The killing of George Floyd and the subsequent deaths of numerous other persons of color, bringing to national consciousness the evils of systemic racism and practices of racial injustice. Actions that, nearly six months later, continue to spark protests and riots in cities across our nation.

The tropical storms and hurricanes that have repeatedly brought destruction to parts of the Gulf Coast and the Southeast.

Wildfires throughout California and the western United States that have scorched millions of acres of land and destroyed numerous properties.

And, of course, one of the most rancorous and divisive presidential elections in the history of our nation. While finally “called” as of yesterday, we now face threats of lawsuits and recounts because of allegations of fraud. Further delaying our preparedness as a nation and our ability to get on with the work that needs to be done: that of healing this nation and caring for her people.

Throughout these past months, I have at times found myself getting choked up, even brought to tears, as I listen to the reports of these and many other events. My heart going out to those who are affected and in pain. To those who have lost hope. My heart breaking open to them and for them. Fearing for what we have become as a people, as a nation. Maybe you have had similar responses to the seemingly constant barrage of heart-rending and heart-breaking stories.

As I’ve thought and prayed about these events, I realize that my emotional response to them, that my heart breaking open, are just a fraction of what God must be experiencing at these newsworthy events. Not to mention the myriad of personal hurts and hopes that all God’s people experience. Hurts and hopes that never make it on the nightly news, that are known to God alone. And my heart breaks even more. And I weep even more.

What does this have to do with being prepared? What does this have to do with a story of five bridesmaids with their lamps burning while five others are not prepared? It is all about the

lamp. It is about each of us who, as followers of Christ, carry a lamp. It is about how we prepare and maintain our lamp. It is about how we use our lamp. The lamp is an image for the word of God, with which we see God's way. And God's way is all about seeking to help those who are hurting. About lighting the way for those seeking relief from pain and restoration of hope. That is the Gospel. That is why Christ came the first time. That is why Christ will come again in the fullness of time. To light the way anew.

For us, the lamp we carry is about devotion to God. Just as Joshua's devotion to God was not prompted by a command from God but was rather inspired by the remembrance of God's saving actions on Israel's behalf. Obedience as a response to divine faithfulness. Put in light of the Gospel for today, it is about being diligent in one's obedience to our Lord. It is about faithful obedience to the Gospel. It is about following God's laws to love God and to love others. It is not just about keeping our lamp burning in anticipation of Christ's return. With so much pain and insanity going on around us, we can't even worry about the Second Coming. We have our hands more than full enough trying to live in the here and now. Trying to cope with the here and now. Trying to prepare for what might come next.

For us, now more than ever, it is about being the light of the Gospel burning in the darkness of all those hurts and lost hopes. It is about being a beacon for those who are looking for a place of safety, a place of respite, in the midst of the chaos of this world, the chaos of their lives. It is about lighting the way so that those who are hurting might be bound up and healed. That those who have lost hope might find a place of comfort, a place of hope, a place of joy. That healing, joy, hope, restoration, and nurture might be found at the banquet prepared by our Lord. It is the call to live each day as though this were the day Christ will return—with us prepared for that eventuality. Prepared not out of fear for the worst, but in the hope of the new day Christ's return will bring. The hope of the new heaven and the new earth that God promises for all his beloved children.