

Matthew 25:1-13
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, New Jersey
Sunday, November 9, 2008

“Preparing to Wait”

I remember from way back when I was a Girl Scout that our motto was “Be Prepared.” I believe the Boy Scouts’ motto is similar or the same. This motto reminds us things can happen very unexpectedly. In particular, I remember a weekend camping trip in which our Girl Scout troop participated when I was in ninth or tenth grade. We planned months ahead for as much as we thought possible. We planned all our meals, how much food to take for these meals, how much of various supplies we would need, what to pack in our sleeping bags and how to pack them, matches for the campfires, and the list goes on. The only element we could not plan too far ahead for was the weather. No one, even a weather prognosticator, can plan for every weather contingency. When I was in Scouts, the weather people did not plan ahead for 5 to 7 days as they do now. It was not a pleasant surprise to discover the day before the camping trip that we were to have not only rain but also possible thundershowers that entire weekend. And we did! You have not fully experienced camping until you have camped out in leaky tents which had been well used over the summer at the Scouts’ camping grounds and slept with your mess kit trying to catch some of the water seeping into your tent which luckily was on a low wooden platform! You have not fully experienced camp meals until you have cooked French toast, pancakes and/or scrambled eggs over an open fire while trying to hold a small umbrella, both for the fire and the food! “Be prepared”? We certainly thought we were prepared until the rains came, the thunder rolled, and the lightning flashed. We were definitely not in the safest of places, but we trusted in God, our leaders, and each other to get us through the

weekend. Luckily, the rains were not consistent with downpours and there were a few breaks in the weather, but not many. We were very happy to return home that Sunday afternoon to try to dry out – both us and our gear.

Today's passage is also about being prepared. But this time the preparation is not for a camping trip. The preparation is for the second coming of Christ and involves ten maidens.

This parable compares the kingdom of heaven to a wedding. The ceremony reaches its climax with the coming of the bridegroom, a scene which regularly happens in the villages of Palestine and is understood by Jesus' hearers. It seems Jewish marriages have three stages: the engagement, the betrothal, and the marriage. This story is about the third state where the bridegroom goes to the home of the bride to bring her to his own home in marriage.

The bridegroom and his friends would go from his house to claim the bride from her parents. Then the bride and groom would return to the groom's home for the marriage feast. The suggestion in this passage is the groom has already claimed his bride and is now on his way back home. We want to be careful in interpreting the parable to not press the image of the church being the bride too far, because much of the image of the church as a bride is not revealed until Paul's ministry.

The church has known for over 2,000 years that Jesus is coming again. Yet many believers become lethargic and drowsy in waiting. They no longer

seem excited about the Lord's coming. As a result, there is little effective witness given that the Lord will return.

In this parable, the ten virgins are friends of the bride and groom who join in the celebration. It is customary at this time for girls to keep the bride company as they wait for the bridegroom, and to dance along the road with their lamps lit in celebration. In this parable, the ten virgins are described as five being wise and bringing extra oil for their lamps and five being foolish and having no extra supply of oil.

This Gospel lesson speaks about the delay of the Parousia, a theological word meaning the Second Coming of our Lord. Matthew's narrative describes a much shorter delay than we think of today and urges a quality of life to be lived in anticipation. It is also considered an Advent parable. Advent is only a few weeks away.

This story discusses ten bridesmaids about whom, when the cry suddenly arises that the bridegroom is on his way, we see the critical difference between the wise ones and the foolish ones. The lamps of the foolish bridesmaids are failing because of lack of oil, so they try to borrow oil from their wiser companions. The wise have brought spare oil for their own lamps, but not enough to take care of everyone's lamps. So they send the foolish ones on a midnight run to the oil merchant.

The story becomes sad, almost tragic. While the foolish bridesmaids are off on their shopping trip, the long-awaited event finally comes to pass. The bridegroom arrives for the wedding banquet. The wise maidens, with lamps

cheerfully shining, happily accompany him into the feast; and the door closes behind them. When the foolish ones finally return and arrive at the banquet, they find themselves shut out of the festivities. They pound on the door to be admitted, but it is too late. Adding to the tragedy, when the bridegroom looks out at them, he claims he does not even recognize their faces. The door to the banquet for which they were waiting, is permanently locked.

Thomas G. Long, a well-known preacher and Biblical expert says most scholars agree this parable, like others, is intended to be taken allegorically. In other words, each major element in the parable is a symbol for something; and Matthew's readers are supposed to be able to crack the code. The wedding banquet may be a symbol of the kingdom of heaven, and the long-awaited bridegroom may be the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. The strange picture of the bridegroom's midnight arrival may reflect the idea that the Messiah will come at an unexpected time, like a thief in the night. The cry of the foolish bridesmaids, "Lord, lord,..." and the sad response of the groom, "I do not know you..." may echo the judgment of Matthew 7:21-23, where Jesus says, "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven;" and Christ may turn away from evildoers with "I never knew you."

Dr. Long then asks, "What about the oil?" What does it mean that the distinguishing characteristic of the wise bridesmaids is they have an extra flask of oil? Some suggest the oil represents good works. The foolish ones may be those Christians who are all excited about Jesus but who lack the commitment to sustain the routine, and possibly lack the enthusiasm for

doing good works through the long “night” of waiting for the kingdom. The wise ones represent those Christians who keep on doing the will of God even when the kingdom is delayed. Adding support to this theory or interpretation is the fact that ancient Jewish teachers often spoke of good works as “oil,” and Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount called on His followers to “let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works” (Matthew 5:16). Without the oil of good works, no light can shine.

The only complication with this interpretation is that none of the bridesmaids, not even the wise ones, actually worked through the night. They all slept, wise and foolish alike. When the parable ends by saying “Keep awake,” it undoubtedly means this in a metaphorical sense, as a figure of speech, because nobody stayed awake in this parable.

A careful reading of the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids always raises questions, since the parable contains a number of features which make it an awkward story: for instance, the long delay of the bridegroom, his arrival at such a late hour, the idea that merchants from whom to purchase oil would be open at midnight, the unwillingness of the wise maidens to share their oil with the foolish, and the concluding words to “keep awake,” when the blemish of the foolish maidens is not that they slept but that they failed to prepare. Evidently, in the history of the tradition, the parable has been changed to fit the situation of a community puzzled about the delay of Jesus’ return.

All the awkward details, however, help to increase the contrast between the wise and foolish bridesmaids. The foolish group really wants to attend this

wedding banquet. They are close enough friends of the bride and groom to be attendants. Yet when they return from their search for oil and call out to the bridegroom, they are rejected as if they are strangers.

Maybe an important clue in interpreting the parable appears when the wiser bridesmaids are described as “those who were ready.” Ready for what? The bridegroom? No, the foolish bridesmaids are eager for the bridegroom to arrive too. The bridesmaids seem to be distinctive not because they are ready for the bridegroom but because they are ready for the bridegroom’s delay. To bring along an extra flask of oil is a signal they are prepared for the bridegroom to come either early or later. If the bridegroom would have arrived on time and if he had come when predicted to arrive, then all the bridesmaids – foolish as well as wise – would have cheerfully greeted him and happily waltzed into the banquet. But the bridegroom, like the kingdom of heaven, does not arrive promptly; the bridegroom is delayed, and some two thousand years later, the kingdom continues to be delayed. The wise ones in the church may be those who are prepared for the delay; who hold on to the faith deep into the night; whom even though they see no bridegroom coming, still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God. Many may finally despair and turn away in discouragement saying, “The bridegroom has left us standing at the altar; the banquet is off; there is no kingdom; life is just one cursed thing after another with no goal or end.” But then in the middle of history’s long night, when the world least expects it, a cry will go up, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Here, at last, the long-expected Jesus! Come out to meet Him!”

The obvious connections in this passage lead to two observations. First, the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is not directed toward outsiders but toward visible members of the faith community, those who call Jesus, “Lord,” those who consider themselves a part of God’s family. The foolish are insiders who, in the face of the delay of the Parousia, or Second Coming of the Lord, ignore the obligations of obedience and whose failures make them outsiders. Second the parable stresses what ultimately matters now is not the theology of those who wait or their accomplishments, but their doing of God’s will. “Watching” means seizing the day, *carpe diem*, loving God, and loving neighbors in each moment.

In this parable, the foolish bridesmaids fail to take account of any delay and are ill equipped for the long wait. Eduoard Schweizer in *The Good News According to Matthew* says, “When Jesus calls on His disciples to keep watch, He is calling on them to take the reality of God so seriously that they can come to terms with its sudden appearance at any moment within their own lives, precisely because they know that this reality will one day come unboundedly in the kingdom of God.”

During the long vigil, the maidens all sleep. At midnight, the joyous cry rings out, “The bridegroom is coming!” The watchfulness is in their being prepared; the fact that all of them sleep is not important. Three of the saddest sayings in this parable found here are: (1) “Our lamps have gone out”; (2) “The door is shut”; and (3) “I do not know you.” These illustrate God’s judgment which is clear and not reversible. We cannot know Christian assurance without the Holy Spirit, and we cannot succeed on borrowed religion.

The conclusion of the story is in verse 13 in the command for vigilance. Jesus simply says, “Watch,” or be prepared. The Christian community asks itself, “What does it mean to wait for our Lord’s coming?” Our Lord gives the answer of faithfulness. “Watch” does not mean standing on a mountain top gazing at the heavens. It simply means to stay awake and be alert.

We are not on a camping trip. We are preparing for a different journey. We are each on a life-long faith journey which will not end but will lead us to eternal life with Christ. God wants us to be prepared for the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ, through reading and studying His words in our Bibles; through talking with our Triune God by praying; through obeying His words; through serving Him; by living the Great Commandments of loving our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. God wants us to be prepared and to watch so when He sends Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, to return for us, we will all be ready. Our faith journeys continue. Will we be ready when Christ comes? May God continue to assist us in preparing for the Parousia, and may we listen and be alert for the joyous cry to ring out, “He comes!” Amen!