

Sermon – Matthew 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
24 Pentecost – Year A
12 November 2023

“Hurry Up and Wait”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. By the time we woke up, it was already too late. Our youthful dreams were interrupted by the harsh cry of our Scoutmaster – my dad – who by his tone of voice alone made it clear that we had overslept. Flaps from a dozen tents pulled back as bleary-eyes teenagers realized we were getting a late jump on the day at Boy Scout camp. It was good that this was clear, because the wake-up cry, shouted in frustration, was a bit confusing. I still think of my dad’s words: “I want everybody up in five minutes, right now!” I’m not sure if he knew what he meant, but it was pretty clear that it would be a bad idea to take an extra five minute of sleep that day! So, up and at ‘em it was, already late, trying to catch up to the day.
2. By the time they woke up, it was already too late. Too late to make up for their critical error. Like the wise, the foolish bridesmaids brought lamps, showed up on time, and then fell asleep. Unlike the wise, they failed to bring flasks with extra oil on the off chance the groom would be late for his own party. At midnight comes the cry, and by the time they fill their flasks at the all-night oil emporium, they are not only too late, they also left out. The wedding party has started without them, and it will continue without them, for the groom will not now let them in. The door has been shut to them and it will not now be opened.

3. Keep awake, therefore, lest you be left out of the party. What is Jesus after here in this parable, one of several he offers in the last week of his life? He urges us to keep awake, but falling asleep is not the sin in the parable. Both the wise and the foolish fall asleep, and the wise are not reprimanded for it. This is not a parable about constant vigilance or hyper productivity. I mean, Jesus fell asleep once in a boat in a storm. Let it not be said that the Lord doesn't know the value of a good nap. No, the sin of the foolish is a failure of preparation. They are perfectly ready for the groom's arrival but *not* for his delay. And his delay necessitates oil for their lamps in the night, oil which they have failed to bring. What is the oil? Because Jesus taught in parables and not math problems, there's likely more than one answer. Perhaps their sin is that of ancient Israel, when the people used perfunctory prayers and at times idolatrous worship to paper over the gross economic inequalities between the wealthy and those upon whom they preyed. Where is the oil of justice and righteousness, the true worship of God that lights up the night? Has it run dry?
4. Or perhaps the oil is faith itself – faith that trusts the promise of the bridegroom's arrival, no matter how long he is delayed. Faith that trusts as a child trusts, knowing that the promise is true because the One who promises is always faithful. Justice, righteousness, faith. Do not our flasks run dry of these, too, particularly when the night is long? Surely, Amos's cry for justice to roll down like waters is still a cry for today's world. Certainly, as time rolls on and the night lengthens, our faith wavers. To paraphrase the Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry, we in the church yearn more for the return of the 1950s than for the return of Jesus. But it is Jesus who is coming back, Jesus who expects to find a church well stocked with oil, faithful in its pursuit of justice and righteousness.
5. Have we done enough to be counted among the wise? Or will we be left outside in the night as those on the inside dance the Electric Slide at the

- wedding banquet of the Lamb? On our own, I'd worry about our chances. Not because we're abject failures, but because surely, we could have done more. But recall when this parable is offered. In just a few days, Jesus the bridegroom will find himself behind the locked door of death. But God does God's best work in the most hopeless circumstances. The Father's love for the Son insists upon his resurrection, and in his rising the stone is rolled away and the door to the feast is blown off the hinges. The parable points to death, but Jesus has turned death into the gateway to life, abundant and everlasting.
6. In just a few minutes, Vero will be brought to this font, baptized into the triune life of God, anointed with oil, sealed by the Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ. Vero, your lamp is filled this day forever with all that you need. Wherever life takes you, whatever wisdom or foolishness you encounter, God will go with you. For God is both loving and relentless and will never let you go. But your lamp is not only for you, and the same is true for each of you, baptized children of God. In baptism we are told what to do with our lamps. To let our light shine before others with good works that reveal the glory of our heavenly Father. We shine God's light by being faithful in the night. We shine God's light by heeding the prophetic call of Amos, remembering that true worship of God is not only what we do in here, but what we also do out there. By working with others to welcome asylum-seeking migrants and fellow children of God into our community. By advocating for a just peace in Israel and Palestine, and for wars in all places to cease. By living with a spirit of joy no matter how long Christ is delayed in his return, trusting in both his promise *and* his abiding presence in the meantime.
 7. Friends, morning is not now far off, and the doors are already open. Come, not with fear that you will be left out but in joy at the invitation. The groom who was late is alive. We are bridesmaids no longer, for Christ has claimed you, dear church, as his bride. Get up, and light your lamps, as beacons of

justice and as signs lighting the way for others, for none now need be left out or behind. Wake up, *right* now, not in fear but in faith. We wait, knowing Christ will come again to bring creation to its fulfillment. Yet even now the celebration is underway. The doorway to life – with Christ and with one another – is wide open now. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.