

Psalm 78:1-7 ~ Matthew 25:1-13

You Have Heard It Said: Plan for Everything... Really? (2nd of 3)

24th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ November 12, 2023

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Introduction

Congratulations FPC worshippers: after five Sundays, we have made it out of the Temple. And before Christmas, as I promised you! Jesus is no longer engaged in entertaining debates with religious leaders who are trying to trap him with trick questions in front of a delighted crowd. Which is where we have been in our gospel story since early October. Today's story is the first of three parables that Jesus tells to just his twelve disciples, privately, in response to their "when" and "what" question concerning the signs of his Second Coming and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:3)

The disciples wanted to know what was coming. They wanted to plan ahead. If only they could *the when and the what* regarding the coming destruction and Jesus' return. They wanted to put it in their calendars and plan accordingly. This was also a burning question for the audience of Matthew's gospel, when this story was written down about fifty years later, after the Second Temple in Jerusalem had actually been destroyed in 70 CE. And so they asked Jesus, "Please just tell us, when will this happen?"

People have been trying to calculate the answer to this "when" question, ever since. They looked for clues in the Bible and in world events to predict when it will occur. A couple of more recent examples: some thought Jesus would return in 1988, forty years after the State of Israel was established in 1948. When 1988 came and went, some latched onto the idea that Jesus would return in the year 2000. Remember the whole Y2K hoopla? But then 2000 rolled in without much ado, and without the return of Christ. Now, twenty-three years later, there are multiple new guestimates. Because people are still asking, "when?" As if Jesus did not answer the disciples' question, right then and there. In Matthew chapter 24 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...Keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." (Matt. 24:36, 42)

Wait, what? That's it? Being such linear thinkers and planners by and large, we who issue from the Western European Christian cultural tradition, have trouble hearing the answer that Jesus gave. We are all about the "when." "Come on Jesus, don't you want us to plan ahead and be prepared for your return?" We mine the scriptures for answers, we look for signs to answer the "when" question. And we missed the point. Maybe that's why Jesus told not one, but three parables to unpack and illuminate what he meant. Three parables that teach us how Jesus calls us to live and move and have our being right now, in this liminal time.

Today we get the one about the ten bridesmaids (keep in mind in Jesus' day, they would have been no more than about 12 years old), their lamps, and the delayed bridegroom.

Sermon

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans." We can thank Woody Allen for bringing this quote into our popular lexicon. Anne Lamott, one of my favorite spiritual writers, tweaked it slightly. Her version is: "If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans." Both derive from the original Yiddish proverb, "We plan, God laughs." And yet here we are, persistently planful Presbyterians, with our daily digital or paper planners. We schedule ourselves and our children, hour by hour, year by year, (whether we are newly minted teen drivers, or working adults, or retired). Let's face it: planning is our jam. And by God, we pray our best laid plans will *not* be interrupted or changed. Most of us like to know what is going to happen and when. I know I do. So, we keep planning, and God keeps laughing.

Especially, perhaps, during this time of year, after Halloween, and before Thanksgiving that in church land we know as stewardship season. You get to hear sermons and testimonies about money and giving (a favorite theme of Jesus' by the way). Right now, all of our committees, teams, and boards are hard at work, building a budget for the coming year, making plans for 2024. Stewardship season officially culminates next Sunday, Nov. 19, Pledge Dedication Day, when we ask you to bring your financial pledge forward and offer it to God. We ritualize this act of financial commitment for the coming year: writing our 2024 pledge on a card, walking it forward (if we are able) side-by-side, placing it in our little wooden church. This is a tangible, bodily act that signifies our gratitude to God and our desire commit ourselves to God's dream for the world, through our plans to give of our time, talent, and treasure. If God laughs when we plan, God must get the biggest kick out of this annual ritual of ours!

I do think God delights in this annual ritual, actually smile upon it. Big time. I believe God smiles upon because of what I hear Jesus trying to teach us in his parable about the ten bridesmaids. With its goofy beginning and scary ending. You may have heard other sermons on this parable, from me and other preachers. This is my third sermon on it here at FPC on it, as we enter our third round together of our three-year lectionary cycle. Today, on Leon's baptism day where we have all just committed to sharing the message of Jesus' love with him, and the next generation. Today is also the day as we consider our call to steward the unspeakable, immeasurable, eternal, incalculable gift of God's grace in preparation for next Sunday's Pledge Dedication ritual. In this context, I have just one point I hope we will glean from this story that keeps on giving.

Over time, this parable has been layered over with allegorical messages and warnings. Traditionally we have come to see the "bridegroom" as standing for Jesus. (Some scholars have found evidence that the story initially included a bride as well but was edited out as the presence of a bride would derail the Jesus as bridegroom allegorical interpretation.) And the bridesmaids have come to represent the church: the faithful/unfaithful; the washed/unwashed. Let's consider the original context, Jesus in his final week, about three days from being crucified. There was no church at that point. No do absolute binaries serve the unifying message of Christ.

Peeling that back, here is my point for today: We are asking the wrong questions. Don't start with the "when" and the "what." Didn't you ever hear the saying, "the devil is in the details?" If we truly seek first the kingdom, if we truly want to live so God can use us any day, any time, if we want to "keep awake," I hear Jesus calling us to privilege presence over planning. That's right, to hold our best laid plans loosely, ready to change, adapt, adjust according to the Jesus' abiding message of radical inclusivity and compassion.

Let's also reconsider what the fatal mistake of the five "foolish" bridesmaids? They left. Feeling inadequate and ill prepared, they were not present when the bridegroom arrived. They were not there. They did not realize, not did their "plan-ahead wise-but-in-the-moment-tunnel-vised other five bridesmaids, see this. They privileged presence over planning. And sent them away! If you think about it--whether or not their lamps had oil in them was secondary. Surely five lamps burning brightly would have been enough to give them the light they needed. Being there, being present as they were, was what mattered.

Friends, being ultra-prepared can shut us off to the gift of the present moment. Being prepared materially, thinking we have every contingency anticipated, breeds complacency and a false sense of security. I am saying this as a person who works hard most days to think ahead and plan ahead for as many contingencies as I can fathom. And yet I truly believe this mind set shuts us off from the reality that Jesus keeps trying to teach us. How we are truly interdependent upon one another, on the earth, on the Great Spirit, our Creator. None of us has it all—or has it all together. None of us.

A more helpful and illuminating way to look at this parable is to consider seeing ourselves in *all three characters* of Jesus' story: Sometimes we are the ones with the oil, who think we have our act together, and make others feel "less than" or inadequate. Sometimes we are the ones caught off guard or live most of our days feeling like we don't have what we need. Running away from where we are supposed to be because we failed to think ahead. And like the bridegroom—are we not sometimes the one who turns someone away because they have not fulfilled our expectations? Like all ten bridesmaids, and the eleven disciples who would go with Jesus to the garden of Gethsemane just a couple nights later: *we all fall asleep*. Waiting for someone or something to happen as we expect it. Or, who knows why those disciples could not stay awake in the crisis of Jesus' final moments before his arrest. But three times he implores them to stay awake: awake to the moment and crisis at hand.

What I hear Jesus saying is, "Stay awake!" Jesus is calling us, compelling us, to wake up and be present to how we can be the Light of the world, Jesus' hands, and feet, eyes, and mouth. Jesus needs your oil, your fire, your passion. Your presence moment by moment. In the day and in the night. Baby Leon Matthias needs your presence. So do all our children. Jesus needs us, as we are, lamp full and firing brightly. And Jesus needs us when we feel like our lamp is broken, damaged, or lost.

When? That's the easy part of the question: not tomorrow, but today. Not later, but now. Before it is too late. Doors do shut on our chances to practice compassion and to work for justice. And if are not awake, we will have missed that moment.

Let's close this sermon together, by singing and praying the first stanza of hymn #700.
I'm gonna Live So God Can Use me, anywhere, Lord, anytime!
I'm gonna Live So God Can Use me, anywhere, Lord, anytime!
Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/the-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-undermines-a-parable/> - The idea of seeing ourselves in all three characters comes from this sermon of David Henson.