

Proper 27A – November 9, 2014
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

As we wind up the Christian liturgical year and head toward the season of Advent in just three weeks, we are given readings today which commend watchfulness and preparedness, as God comes to us, not just at some final and far-off time, but in our day, in moments of truth, of encounter, of challenge.

Advent is a season of expectation, full of hints of Christ's coming, and we are reminded of the necessity of being ready for God's breaking into the world and into our hearts, and to watch for God's visitation. But, this parable we hear today is a necessary corollary to all the watchfulness called for in Advent.

To be sure, we ought to be on the watch lest Christ's coming, like a thief in the night, catches us unawares. But we will miss any coming, any visitation, any assurance of his presence, (any heavenly banquet,) if we are not first prepared for the delay, for his absence. The ones in this parable were ready for a "coming," but were unprepared for a delay, and their unpreparedness had consequences. Today our message says, "Keep awake and tend to that which will prepare you to receive and be received by God, lest you be left outside as a result of your own negligence."

The Church as a whole has not been all that good at attentive preparation. In fact, looking over time, part of what could be called the "treason" of the church through the centuries was to settle in and settle for, to wait contentedly and complacently for something and someone in whom they hoped and prepared for less and less; and to organize rigid doctrines and self-assured institutions so as to wait as comfortably as possible; and finally, to no longer to expect or prepare for anything at all, but to settle in for business as usual. Although it's a rather sweeping generalization, another way of putting this, as some have, is that "in the beginning the Church was a fellowship of men and women centered on the living Christ. But then the Church moved to Greece where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next it moved into Europe, where it became a culture and a government. And finally, it moved to America, where it became an enterprise."ⁱ Yet, I might add, now that it is in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in a number of ways it is becoming centered again on the Living Christ.

Now, how do we deal with delays in our lives—whether it's delays on the train or highway or in airports, delays in medical treatments, or in court cases or whatever? We have choices each time. We can become frustrated, embittered, cynical and resigned to the point of apathy - or rage; and let these responses burn out our supply of oil, as it were, as with half the bridesmaids in this gospel story. Or, we can be prepared in hope, believing and acting in spite of the evidence to the contrary, and then watching the evidence change. We can keep oil in our lamps, though prayer that sustains us, the sacraments that nourish us, the faith community that shoulders us, and the life-giving Spirit of Jesus

which animates and empowers us. Listen to one observer, who writes about the importance of guiding lights,

“Circumscribing the illumination of darkness, [the] lamp has been associated with consciousness and its capacity to sustain the flame of life, hope, freedom, creativity and the sacred and divine. Perpetually lighted lamps in temple, mosque, synagogue or church are a sign of divine presence suffusing the ordinary world. The Paschal candle of western Christianity is ritually lit each year at Easter from the ‘new fire,’ and represents the light of Christ. Eternal flames at gravesites suggest the continuity of life—death and resurrection...With the progression a century ago from the oil lamp to the electric, to footlights, headlights, stadium lights, we have tended to identify with the great genii of the lamp, as if we owned the night and had the freedom to light up the darkness any way we want [in fact, could we, in our day, have even located the guiding light of the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem, given all our modern light ‘pollution?'] But...[some of our guiding lights can still evoke] subtler illumination in accord with nature—psyche’s luminosity, for example—the dawning of an idea; the moment of clarity; [the way to the ‘Light of the world’—‘this little light of mine; I’m going’ to let it shine.’]”ⁱⁱ

It is certainly more interesting to argue with this parable than to go along with it. After all, why are the five wise bridesmaids so stingy and unimaginative? Why couldn’t each of them have taken one of the foolish bridesmaids by the hand and lead her through the dark so that all of them arrived safely at the banquet? Jesus obviously is not so interested in solutions like this, at least in this particular parable. He does not want half of us unprepared and unawares, depending on the preparedness and attentiveness of the other half. He wants all of us alert, all of us prepared. While this parable has an ominous, threatening sound, there is a promise inside of it—for we all have been invited to a wedding feast, a party! As the late Robert Farrar Capon put it, “God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. [Rather] he is a funny Old Uncle with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other. We do indeed need to watch for him; but only because it would be such a pity to miss all the fun.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet the inescapable reality of our lives and our respective spiritual journeys is that nobody can be prepared for you. Although there is the temptation to look upon the prepared bridesmaids in the story as selfish and insensitive—after all, why couldn’t they have shared some of their lamp oil with the others? Nonetheless, to ask someone else to do what only you yourself can do, will not work. Spiritual oil, as it were, is not interchangeable. Just as a student who has not studied for an exam cannot have another student take it for him or her, none of us can borrow preparedness for God or relationship with God from another; nor can we just rely on whatever goodness or openness or compassion someone else can express on our behalf, even though they can be of support. Sure—at times, if you can’t shine your own light, as it were, stand next to the light of another and receive the encouragement of their faith. But again, having said that, life’s journey does not provide us with a stunt man or woman, or some double to stand in for us. Being a part of a supportive family and a nurturing community of faith is helpful and meaningful, but the

oil we carry is our own relationship with God—ultimately you and I cannot borrow that relationship. Each of us must ultimately find it in ourselves, not just through the faith of others or through hearsay, but in our own experience—and not just later, but here and now.^{iv}

So, keep awake; seek for God’s coming into your life; and be prepared during the seeming delay. That is the message of this parable. And what is the content of the preparedness? What is the spiritual oil we are to carry with us? If we want our lamps to be lit by holy fire ready to meet Christ in all circumstances of our lives, we need to have them filled and ready, stoked with prayer and Scripture, Sabbath time and worship; wicked with hope and courage, and in the giving and receiving of compassionate love and in the doing of justice. Again, Jesus makes his point that our lives are consequential, that our relationship with God is not a matter of having or borrowing someone else’s faith—nor even so much a matter of “having” our own faith—as it is more a matter of *doing* faith; and where we do not do our faith, there are consequences, for others as much as for us. In fact, the way we are to be prepared is not so much through offerings to God of our church services, nor our celebrations of our hallowed traditions.^v What God wants from us by way of preparation is simple, but not easy: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God,” says the prophet Micah.^{vi} Keeping oil in our lamps is more a function of the doing of kindness and of justice than religious practice or piety.

Finally, although our passages call forth our personal and social responsibility; they also point to the Grace of God that underlies it all. The Gospel—the Good News—is that God can and will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. None of us is ever fully prepared, and no one is ever “running on full” when it comes to the spiritual life. In the end, we are saved by Grace, not by how much oil we’ve been able to keep in our lamp. God is at work in our world and in our lives whether we recognize it or not. The good news is that the bridegroom comes not just once but over and over again, opening wide the banquet door to see if we are ready to receive and be received into his fuller presence, into his feast of joy. God is “not only the feast, but the way to it,” as George Herbert put it.^{vii} So, whether we are wise or foolish, whether Christ comes fully tomorrow or not for another two millennia, we are made one with God now by God’s unconditional and unending love.

ⁱ Quote from Richard C. Halverson, in a speech before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1984. An earlier version of this was written by Leonard Ravenhill.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in “Lamp/Candle” in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 580.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 166.

^{iv} As the Zen poet Basho stated, “Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. [Rather] Seek what they sought.”

^v An incident that took place in England some years ago involved Mark Gibbs who wrote an interesting book entitled *God’s Frozen People*. Gibbs was traveling through a number of ancient cathedral towns, and in one location he stopped at an old parish church and was met by the vicar who gave him a tour. At the end of

the tour—and having described the parish’s life—the vicar rather proudly stated, “What we have here is 500 years of tradition,” whereby Mark Gibbs couldn’t resist as he untactfully replied, “I don’t think so. What you have here is one year of tradition, and you’ve repeated it 500 times!” He made a point and that reminds me of the light bulb joke: How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Change! Change? My grandfather gave that light bulb! Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that tradition and well established ways of doing things are wrong or bad. In fact, often the opposite is true. What I am saying is that it is how we approach our tradition and familiar ways of being a church in either dynamic or static ways, that determines how positive or negative it can be for us now as a community in transition, and in the future. The seven last words of the Church are “We have always done it this way,” as an old adage goes. Or as Jaroslav Pelikan put it, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” [Jaroslav Pelikan “The Vindication of Tradition: 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities”] Jesus, who leads us into all sorts of new situations and challenges, new wanderings and adventures, is the one to whom the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of as “the same yesterday and today and forever. [13:8]” Jesus who was and is and is to come is our dynamic tradition—old but also new, changeless but ever changing.

^{vi} Micah 6:8

^{vii} George Herbert, A Priest to the Temple; or the Country Parson (1652): Ch. XXII.