

Pentecost 26/Proper 27  
November 9, 2008  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ  
&  
Redeemer Lutheran Church – Succasunna, NJ

---

Amos 5:18-24    Psalm 70    I Thessalonians 4:13-18    Matthew 25:1-13

Be Prepared

It seems somehow fitting that having just entered daylight savings time, when the days grow shorter and darker, our texts turn to speaking of darker things. We hear talk of the communion of saints, of judgment, and of the second coming of Christ. These are dark subjects, fitting for these dark days of autumn. We're asked to consider what Jesus' coming into the world for a second time will mean, and what we as Christians are supposed to do to prepare for that day.

Preparing for Jesus' return was something that was very much on the minds of Christians at the time Matthew wrote his Gospel. And, we hear this also in the writings of Paul. Christians at that time believed Jesus' return to be imminent, that it was going to happen during their lifetimes. This was an issue that the Apostle Paul addressed in his second letter to the Christians at Thessalonika. Some had become discouraged that Jesus had not yet come again. Others had completely stopped working, anticipating Jesus' return any day. Paul admonished both groups, saying that what they needed to do is live forward in faith. They needed to live their lives

as if Jesus might return any moment, while continuing to be faithful to the ministry of the here and now.

And this brings us to today's Gospel reading. The people to whom Matthew wrote were obviously facing a similar situation. They had been told that Jesus would return. And yet, they faced the difficulty of living fruitfully in the here and now, while waiting with eager anticipation for the completion of the kingdom when Jesus returned. What to do?

+ + +

So we have today's parable of the ten bridesmaids. There is a wedding feast. Such celebrations spanned several days. The bridesmaids had gathered in anticipation of the bridegroom coming to take them to the feast. Some had come prepared for a lengthy wait; others thought the bridegroom would come right away, so they were unprepared for the wait. When it became apparent that the wait was longer than they'd anticipated, these foolishly unprepared bridesmaids were told they'd better go out and get some more oil. And while they are gone, the bridegroom comes to take those who were prepared to the wedding banquet.

+ + +

How many times have you heard some evangelist say, “If Jesus came tomorrow, would you be ready?!?” They seem to be talking to the non-believers when they say this. It’s as if they’re trying to scare people into belief.

But notice one thing: Matthew doesn’t use today’s parable to tell us to “Wake Up!” This isn’t a story trying to convert non-believers. It’s not about waking up. It’s not about remaining awake, or even alert. Notice what the text says, in verse 5: “As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.” ALL of them. Both the foolish and the wise bridesmaids fell asleep. Matthew isn’t using this story to try to awaken us to faith.

This parable is an analogy. Again, just like we’ve been talking about in our study of Matthew’s parables for the past six weeks, Matthew’s not talking to the non-believers – he’s talking to those who are on the inside, those who are already Christians. It’s written for those of us who wait for Christ’s second coming into the world. Perhaps it’s a warning to those of us who already believe to be prepared, for Jesus the bridegroom could come at any time.

+ + +

“Be Prepared.” That’s the motto of the Boy Scouts of America. One former Boy Scout said the following:

“Maybe I was unusually naïve, but when I was a Boy Scout, the motto made all the sense in the world to me. I wasn’t just earning merit badges; I was getting prepared for an adult life.

“I loved the various merit badges,” he said. “Geology, Animal Husbandry, Communications, First Aid, and all the rest. Every one of them related to something that adults had to do. And we were sampling the things adults had to do, getting prepared for that day when we wouldn’t simply be earning merit badges that gave us a taste of this in advance, but we would actually have to be doing it.”<sup>1</sup>

I like this analogy. That being a Boy Scout prepares the boy for the responsibilities of adulthood. This analogy places what we as Christians do today in its proper context. It’s as if we’re in training. It’s as if all of life becomes the training ground for what life in Christ means, and what that life should look like.

+ + +

There is a famous quote from Martin Luther that I have written in calligraphy and framed, hanging on a wall where I can see it often. It goes like this:

This life therefore is not righteousness but growth in righteousness;

Not health but healing,

Not being but becoming,

Not rest but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be

But we are growing toward it,

The process is not yet finished

But it is going on,

This is not the end

But it is the road.

All does not yet gleam in glory

But all is being purified.

This writing speaks grace to me. When I feel that I have somehow failed to live up to what Jesus would have me be, I am reminded that this life is a training ground. It's a training ground for Christians. Life in Christ is meant to help prepare us for that day when Christ will come again to make all things new. But that is an ongoing process, one which will not reach its completion until Jesus comes again.

It's a reminder that while I wait with eager anticipation for that day, there is work yet to be done this day. Just because the bridegroom has already come into the world to free us from our anxious striving to please God doesn't give us license to sit back, as some of those Thessalonians had done, and do nothing while we wait.

Martin Luther was once asked what he planned to do that day. He said, “I plan to plant a tree.” His friend then asked him, What would you do today if you knew that Jesus was returning tomorrow? Luther responded, “I’d plant a tree.” I think this is perhaps the point of today’s parable. We are to live our lives each day in the very same way we would if we knew that Jesus was returning tomorrow. Living this way nullifies the televangelists’ question: “What would you do if you knew that Jesus was coming tomorrow?” Living each and every day as if Christ was coming again soon renders that question meaningless.

+ + +

But just how hard is that for us to do? For most of us, our life of faith ebbs and flows. There are times when we’re on that mountaintop, where faith and acts of love seem to flow freely and abundantly. Yet there are also times when we feel like we’re in the valley, when much of life doesn’t seem right, where God seems distant, and indeed, we begin to wonder if God is even listening to our prayers.

It is perhaps in these “valley experiences” that today’s parable can come to us as good news. Perhaps this parable isn’t so much about being prepared for the bridegroom who comes unexpectedly in the night. Perhaps this parable is about a gracious promise from God:

“Though today you may be frustrated with the inactivity of God in your life – be patient. The Lord promises to come to you. Though you may be tired of waiting for deliverance, though you may have earnestly prayed for the living God to be present to you in a vital, an undeniably real way – take heart. Though you may be uncertain just what God wants you to do in your life, take heart, God has work for you to do and will eventually call upon you to do it. By our human standards, God may be moving too slowly. When we are in pain or difficulty, any wait can seem too long. But be well assured, our God is a living God. Our God keeps God’s promises. And our God has promised to come to you.”<sup>2</sup>

And indeed, our God comes to us. God comes to us when we gather together to celebrate the Holy Communion. We eat and drink in anticipation of joining in that great marriage feast in the coming kingdom. God comes to us in the most ordinary of means, through the bread and wine. God comes to us to restore us and renew us for our participation in His mission in the here and now.

As we prepare to partake in the feast that God has prepared for us today, know that God does come to us, in ways that are ordinary and in ways that are often unexpected. But our bridegroom does, indeed, come to us, calling us all out to partake in that great marriage feast at the end of days.

Amen.

<1,554 words>

---

<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, “Get Ready for God” in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2008), 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*