

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

November 8, 2020

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Wisdom of Solomon 6: 12-20

Psalms 70

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Matthew 25: 1-13

Preparations

I need to start by making a couple of confessions. When I first read today's assigned Gospel passage, my first thought was, "Score! An easy parable." And my second thought was, "Yikes! So, what is there to say about it?" And my third thought was rather irreverent: "Wow! New Testament preppers!"

Y'all know about preppers, right? They're the people who spend a lot of time, energy, and money being prepared for a host of catastrophic events. At the low end of the range are the DC area residents who rush to the supermarket when the forecast calls for snow, so they can buy enough milk, bread, and toilet paper to endure a winter at the North Pole. The middle-of-the-roaders are epitomized by an older couple who are friends with my mother; they go to prepper conventions. They have a lot—I mean a LOT—of canned goods. From time to time they drop a box of food at Mom's house—usually items past their expiration date. The extreme preppers are those off-the-grid people who are prepared for total annihilation. They don't just have canned goods; they have seeds for planting, guns and ammo for hunting, a chemical toilet, a sealed underground bunker. These folks are PREPARED.

As you can tell, I tend to poke gentle fun at the notions behind the prepper movement. After all, with minimal extra preparation, I've gotten through numerous blizzards, a couple of hurricanes that blew north along the East Coast, the power outage from the 2012 derecho. As a frugal shopper, I generally have enough staple supplies in the house to get through a few days of inconvenience. And I'm pretty sure that I don't WANT to survive a global nuclear catastrophe, an asteroid strike, or an alien invasion.

Seriously, though, we know this isn't what Jesus is talking about in his parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Yes, it's a prudent thing to take extra oil for your lamp if you aren't sure how long it will need to burn. Just as it's prudent to have basic supplies at home, some food you can prepare without electricity, a go-bag and evacuation plan if you live in a storm zone, on a flood plain, or near timberland prone to wildfires. But this story is a metaphor that warns us to be ready not for physical crises, but for the coming of God's Kingdom. It's one of several parables in the various Gospels in which Jesus reminds us that no one knows the timing of God's day of judgment, the day when all people will have to account for themselves. We think of Jesus' comparison of the coming of the Son of Man to Noah's flood¹ and to Sodom in the days of Lot²,

¹ Matt. 24: 36-42

² Luke 17: 28-35

his story of the homeowner and the thief³, the slaves awaiting the master's return from a journey⁴. A common feature of these parables, as well as Jesus' more straightforward warnings to be ready for the coming of the day of the Lord, is their emphasis on the urgency, the surprise. Paul does the same in today's passage from his first letter to the Thessalonians, in which he predicts a sudden return of Christ.

So, are you prepared? Are you ready spiritually and morally to justify your life before God? When you encounter St. Peter at the pearly gates or stand before the throne of God or mill about in the great flock as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats—whatever metaphor you favor—are you ready? Do you feel confident that you can say, “Yes, I loved God with all my heart and mind and soul, and I loved my neighbors as myself. I did justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly with God.” Do you?

Because I'm not sure that I do feel confident about that. Jesus gave us two simple commandments, and I fall short in obeying them every day. I neglect to thank God for my life and daily blessings, instead whining at minor inconveniences and complaining if I don't get my way. Far too often, I do what I want to do rather than trying to discern what God would have me do. Like those foolish bridesmaids, I fail to top off my tank of resilience and find myself totally unready for the needs of the moment. I do no better with regard to the second commandment; I get impatient with other people, resentful of impositions on my time. I become a raging monster behind the wheel of a car. I seldom take time to think deeply about the privilege that has shaped my life and the enormity of the bias and discrimination that have favored my worldly success. Am I ready? Nope. If the master of the house returns today, this servant will be abysmally unprepared.

I say all of this not to frighten you, not to threaten, not even to warn. Rather, I say this to open your eyes and mine to the tremendous opportunities that God gives us every day in our earthly life to fulfill our baptismal promises—a list of pledges, familiar and easily found in our Book of Common Prayer, that should guide our behavior as we strive to obey Jesus' commandments. All that we really have to do is open our eyes and hearts to those opportunities, for God will always meet us where we are. Wisdom—usually interpreted as a personification of the Holy Spirit—“hastens to make herself known to those to desire her.” Through a series of logical statements, our reading today leads us from “desire for instruction” to the keeping of God's laws to a kingdom of immortality and nearness to God. We can repent and begin again—over and over, as often as necessary—with the smallest steps.

In her latest e-mailed meditation, our Assistant Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson paraphrased our baptismal promises in a way that I can't improve on:

- Respect each human individual as made in the image of God. No exceptions.
- Devote our time and resources to work for justice for all.
- Act as a peacemaker in a world of anger and violence.
- Consider people from every race, nation, culture, gender, and religion our equal.

³ Matt. 24: 43-44; Luke 12: 39-40

⁴ Matt. 24: 45-51; Mark 13: 34-37; Luke 12: 35-38

- Look behind the masks and distortions of this world to find the divine spark in each person.
- Live in a way that shows the world how everybody can live into God’s dream.
- Talk about how God’s love for the world is concretely revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus.
- Continue to admit the ways we have failed in following Christ and try again each time.
- Resist the forces and impulses that seek to harm, destroy, or denigrate people or God’s creation.
- Remain connected to our community of faith, learn from authoritative spiritual teachers, and maintain deep conversation with God.⁵

I know that it sometimes feels as if coronatide and the election season have either gone on forever or caused time to stand still, but the year has continued to pass. So we find ourselves today only three weeks away from First Advent, the start of the new church year and, for us, the start of a new chapter of our parish life. What better time than Advent—a season of preparation for all of Christendom—for us to rededicate ourselves to our own spiritual preparation, our readiness to meet God, in full confidence that we have done our best. What better time to fill up our lamps. Amen.

⁵ The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Brooke-Davidson, A Meditation for the 22nd Week After Pentecost: Who Will We Be on Wednesday, 2 November 2020 E-mail.