

The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
November 12, 2017
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

*“Rejoice! Rejoice, believers, and let your lights appear!
The evening is advancing, and darker night is near.”*

Those are the opening lines of a hymn we’ll sing later this morning. It’s an Advent hymn. It’s not Advent yet, but the hymn goes very well with our gospel reading this morning. All of our readings this morning are sort of Advent-ish; they anticipate the coming of Advent, the “advent of Advent.” Advent is still a couple of weeks away, but it’s coming.

But for most of us, this probably sounds like the part of Advent we like the least. We’re not talking about the coming of the baby Jesus yet. It’s not even John the Baptist, baptizing in the wilderness and preparing the way for the Messiah. No, this is the scary part of Advent: “the archangel’s call ... the sound of God’s trumpet ...” and all that stuff!

That’s how we hear it, but that’s not entirely how it was first intended. Take First Thessalonians as a start. I was reminded this past week that this is the oldest writing in the New Testament. Paul wrote this letter in response to a crisis for the early Church ... maybe the first crisis. People were starting to die, which some found puzzling and alarming; they thought Jesus would return in the lifetime of that first generation of believers. So Paul wrote them to reassure them, saying that Jesus, in the end, will hold them and us, the living and the dead alike, all together.

In other words, Paul wasn’t trying to scare anyone. He was trying to encourage them – and to admonish them to encourage one another – even in the midst of grief and confusion.

This morning’s gospel, written maybe 30 years or so later, is doing the same. The need, after so many years and with so few (if any) of those first believers left, was even more urgent.

It’s harder still, 2,000 years later, to maintain hopeful vigilance.

Unfortunately, it’s not at all clear to me that the story in Matthew’s gospel is very helpful for us, at least not as we’re likely hear it.

On the face of it, the story Jesus tells is about ten bridesmaids going out to greet the bridegroom arriving for his wedding night. But five of them, we’re told, were foolish. Actually, the text says they were “morons” (μωροὶ). And then the other five are described as wise (φρόνιμοι). The point, as we probably hear it, seems to be simply that the foolish bridesmaids, having failed to plan ahead adequately, will be found lacking when the bridegroom finally arrives and they’ll be left out in the cold. Only those who are wise, who plan ahead, will be welcomed in.

Now that may be the obvious way of telling and of hearing this story. And it may even be, I should allow, the right one. But I'm not sure that it's helpful.

And I think there's another way of our hearing it, and maybe something more helpful for us to hear in it. Five of the bridesmaids, as I said, were morons. That's fine, so far as it goes. But maybe a bit harsh. Silly may be closer to the truth. But whatever word you choose, they're never described as evil or bad.

And in all fairness, there were just girls. The word we translate as bridesmaids is actually "virgins," which is to say there were unmarried. Now if women married at around the age of 13, they might be 10 or 12 years old. Even allowing for different times, it hardly seems fair to expect so much of a girl so young, heading off to a party with a group of her friends.

Of course, there were the other five. They're described as wise, a word meaning something close to our word "prudent" ... which doesn't seem so very far from "prude." And maybe that's a bit harsh, in its own right. But I think I want to stay with it, if only to suggest that maybe they weren't paragons of virtue. Remarkably well-prepared for unforeseen circumstances, true, carrying extra flasks of oil along ... just in case. But they're not very nice about it. It's probably not fair to them, but they seem a bit smug to me. Superior. And, in the end, just mean.

What I want to suggest is that if five of them are morons and five of them are prudes, there's not a huge gap between them. None of them are exemplary. They're all flawed. They're all human. And maybe they're more alike, at least to that extent, than they – or we – might imagine. And notice this: when the bridegroom is delayed, they all become drowsy and they all fall asleep, the wise along with the foolish. And when the bridegroom finally does arrive, they all get up and they all trim their lamps to get ready to welcome him. Again, not that different.

I remember one or two other occasions when Jesus' own disciples became drowsy and fell asleep. In Luke's account of the Transfiguration, his closest friends became drowsy and might have missed it but for waking up to see Jesus with Moses and Elijah (Lk. 9:32). And of course, Jesus complains in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before he died, that none of the disciples could stay awake with him while he prayed. Jesus rebukes them, but he doesn't dismiss them. The bridesmaids here are the same. Human. Flawed. But hardly disqualified.

And what happens next? Well, what happens next is that nobody does the right thing. When the foolish bridesmaids realize they've run out of oil for their lamps, they ask their wiser friends to share. But the prudes refuse. They say they may run out. But really, how much would be enough? How much extra do they need to hang onto? The bridegroom, after all, is at the gate.

They'd probably say that they're just being prudent. But no, I'd say they're just being prudes. And I cannot, for the life of me, make sense of their pettiness nor can I justify their selfishness. It flies in the face of a biblical tradition that exhorts us to always share what God has given. "Go, sell what you have, and give to those in need," Jesus once said, "then come, and follow me."

No, when the wise ones tell their foolish friends to buy some oil, they're just being mean. It's a "fool's errand," after all. Where could anyone find an oil shop open for business at midnight?

But off the morons go on that "fool's errand." I think that's their foolishness: they thought they could buy what they could not – and, so far as I can tell, what they did not need.

Now, what would have happened if the foolish bridesmaids had stayed put and waited with the others? I'd like to imagine the wise ones might have relented and shared some of the extra oil they had left over, so that ten lamps would have burned brightly to welcome the party.

But even if they shared and each of the ten lamps all burned a bit dimmer as a result, the sum total of their light would have matched five of them burning brightly. And either way, the extra people at the party would surely result in a more substantial celebration!

And if not, even if the prudes continued to hoard their oil, what then? If five of the lamps grew dim and sputtered, maybe even went out, what might have happened then?

We don't know, of course; five of the bridesmaids were off on their fool's errand, in search of what they could not buy, and did not need. For my part, though, I don't see the bridegroom stopping the procession to check their oil before going on into the wedding banquet. I think he'd have welcomed his friends into the light of that banquet, unconcerned about the state of their lamps, happy just to have his friends on hand to celebrate his joy.

Maybe I've played a little too loose with the story Jesus tells. But I think my way of telling it makes it possible to hear something that still works for us. Jesus said, "Keep awake!" but it's impossible. It didn't happen within the context of the story Jesus tells. His disciples couldn't manage it while Jesus was with them. Paul recognized the challenge 20 years later. Matthew saw it 30 years after that.

But even if it's impossible for us to keep awake 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, over the course of 2,000 years, maybe it is possible for us to stay together, encouraging one another through our dark nights, whenever they come. There are days when our lamps shine – we have enough faith, hope, charity, etc., to feel confident of God's acceptance. But there are inevitably other days, when it all seems dark. Stay put. Stay together. Encourage one another.

In the story Jesus told, when the time of celebration came, some of those invited missed it. They were scrambling to take care of what they thought needed to be done, hoping to acquire what they could not purchase and did not need. In these days before Advent, these weeks before Thanksgiving and then Christmas, that is still a cautionary tale. Meister Eckhart once said, "God is at home. It is we who have gone for a walk." It's easy to imagine any number of ways for any of us to become so preoccupied with preparations and planning that we take a walk, trying to purchase what we do not need, and in the process fail to enter into the joy of the celebration.