

Pentecost 23A. November 12, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13. "Wise? Foolish? Beloved!"

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." ⁹But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." ¹²But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

In our first lesson, the prophet Amos talks about what he called the "day of the Lord." We could think of that as the day Jesus returns, perhaps the day we die. It's not going to be pretty, says Amos – because the Lord hates our worship: the hymns, the bulletins, the standing up and sitting down – IF our hearts are not pure and IF we do not exercise justice and righteousness. Amos is not against religion; Amos is against *meaningless religion* that doesn't connect what we do on Sunday with what we do on Monday.

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Last Monday morning in Sutherland Springs, TX, people from First Baptist and their families and friends were forced to call on their faith for strength. My heart is torn this morning as I imagine worship there. Yes, the people who died are with the Lord. But long before those at First Baptist can take hold of that comfort, they have many tears to wipe, many people to hug, many funerals to endure. We hold them in our prayers.

And we, like they, try to make sense of our Sunday religion after the past week. We don't know what kind of evil or accident might befall us. We don't know the effects of the evil that seems so prevalent in our world

today, in every nation, in high offices and low, in rich homes and poor, in and outside of churches, schools, other public gathering places.

We can easily grow weary, run out of oil, feel like the foolish bridesmaids in our Gospel story, at least some of the time. If the oil of justice and righteousness in our lamps runs out on Monday, we may as well have stayed home on Sunday. Then our worry about the fate of our nation, our deployed troops, our town's homeless children, and our own fates can overtake us.

Paul's church in Thessalonica was worried -- worried about the believers who had died before Jesus' return. Ever since those first Sundays when Jesus showed himself to his disciples, later groups of disciples expected Jesus to return any Sunday now. They worried that he wouldn't come again or that they somehow had missed the event. Paul tried to comfort them.

But somehow the idea of a "rapture" was born: a carrying up to heaven of some and the leaving behind of others. This concept has taken over entire racks in book stores and entire pages on Amazon -- because people want some kind of security, some kind of knowledge of "what will happen" when the "Day of the Lord" comes, when Jesus returns. You can probably see how confusing and distracting and frightening such books and ideas can be.

Decades after Paul's writing, Matthew's church was worried too. By now most people who knew Jesus had died. People had been waiting a long time for Jesus to return. Unspeakable atrocities had occurred: many crucifixions, the magnificent temple in ruins. People reading Matthew's words tried valiantly to remain hopeful, to be prepared, to have the oil of hope and faith in their lamps, to not lose heart. Matthew pictured Jesus as bridegroom and the church as bride. Some of our theologians and hymns use that wonderful imagery as well.

In a marriage, the bride and groom co-mingle their resources. In an unbalanced marriage, one party may have good credit and yet agree to share the other's credit card debt, mortgage, or car payments. That's a good image of the marriage of Christ and the church. Christ takes on our debts and brokenness and shares his godliness and goodness with us.

Jesus weds the church, his beloved – he takes on all the flaws, the injustice, the empty oil lamps – and gives his bride a wedding garment of righteousness with the oil of the Holy Spirit to keep her – us -- burning for the welfare of the world, the poor, those hard to love.

In the joyful wedding feast of Holy Communion, Jesus strengthens his beloved, makes us aware of his continued presence among us. Our worship, our church becomes a place where we find forgiveness, help, support, oil for our lamps. We are a church full of wise and foolish folks who console one another, celebrate with one another, forgive one another, grieve with one another, encourage one another, and foster hope.

When we have worries about the end times or someone starts talking about HOW or WHEN they will come, we lean on Jesus' words that no one knows when the end times will be and that he is with us always. We remember Martin Luther's reputed answer to the question, "If you knew the end of the world would come tomorrow, what would you do?" He is said to have answered, "plant an apple tree." We take to heart old prophet Amos' admonition to integrate our Sunday worship with the way we spend the rest of the week.

Once when I was in seminary and was sent out to work in a small NJ church, a woman came running up to Pastor Smith to tell him that this and that prophecy had predicted the end of the world to be this week. He straightened up to his full height and laughed heartily. "We should be so lucky!" he said.

So with such faith, such comfort, we only have to ask ourselves what to do while we wait. Or... is that even a question we entertain?

Do you remember Miss Havisham in Charles Dicken's 1861 novel "Great Expectations"? Maybe you read it in high school. Miss Havisham was abandoned on her wedding day by a malicious bridegroom who didn't show up. In the story, we find her years later, still wearing her ragged wedding dress, her table still set with a now-rotten wedding cake, her clocks stopped and her life fueled by anger and vindictiveness. A pretty unhappy way to WAIT for the groom!

Waiting is HARD. You veterans remember waiting for a letter, waiting for a leave, waiting for a battle to begin or to end or for orders to arrive. Today we worry as we wait for the kids to come home; the diagnosis, the test scores or results, the chemo to be over. How hard it is to wait even for good things: for the grandbaby to come, the traveler to return home safely, the post-funeral grief to lighten. How long must I wait to find my true vocation, to figure out retirement, to find the right niche in a new town or a new church, to recover from this illness?

Maybe we look at what some of our forebears did while they waited. Mary, Jesus' mother, had to wait – and probably was full of anxiety and sleeplessness despite Gabriel's words of hope. But "when the fullness of time had come" Jesus was born and made her the mother all people have called blessed.

Mary and Martha waited desperately for Jesus to come and heal their brother Lazarus; when Lazarus died, they became despondent and complained to Jesus: "Lord, if you had come sooner, my brother would not have died." But it was not too late. "I am the resurrection and the life," declared Jesus and called Lazarus forth from the tomb.

Jesus has been telling his disciples the stories we have been reading these past weeks, in the week we call holy, all the while waiting for Passover and the trials and the cross. During times of waiting, Jesus prayed and taught, Mary and Martha prayed and tended their brother, Mary prayed and visited her cousin Elizabeth for strength and consolation. They did what they were called to do! No one sat around moping like Miss Havisham!

The best way to prepare for the coming of Christ is to never forget the presence of Christ. (William Barclay "You can say that again" Christianity Today, Vol 39, No. 8)

We don't have to sit around like Miss Havisham. Our bridegroom has come. We don't have to worry about understanding how or when Christ might come again, we don't have to cry when our oil seems low and our lamps are dim.

Instead we are blessed to live in a state of openness to God's dramatic and life-giving future, to the trumpet announcing his presence – for he is most present among us when justice is done; when burdens are borne; when

one bridesmaid reaches out to another with listening ear, when the bridesmaids with the oil link hands with those who have no oil and walk together into the wedding feast – all beloved and welcome. We lie down to sleep in confidence knowing we are prepared for whatever awakens us, be it in this life or the next. Jesus prepares us and we are his beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen.