

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Reading Ourselves

Matthew 25:1-13

Back in 2007, a news agency reported on a wedding being planned by Dave Best and his fiancée. It was planned for the following year in Wales. Many couples worry about whether the guests will show up on time for the ceremony. But in this case, they should have worried about Dave Barclay, who showed up a year early for the wedding. When Best told Barclay about the July 6 wedding, Barclay thought he meant July 6, 2007. So Barclay bought a \$1,000 plane ticket from Toronto. When he arrived in Wales, he called Best to get some details on the location of the venue for the wedding. Only then did he discover that he was a bit ahead of schedule. The next year, Barclay got it right. But looking back on his error, he said, "At least it assured me a mention in the wedding speech."¹

In today's text from Matthew, the wedding issue isn't early arrival but late arrival. Or to be more accurate, delayed arrival. From what little we know about first-century Jewish wedding ceremonies, this wasn't uncommon. There might be last-minute negotiations between the groom and the bride's relatives over the gifts exchanged, or other matters that needed to be addressed. Matthew doesn't go into detail about the reasons for the groom's delay. That's not what's most important. At this point, what matters is that the groom is going to show up later than expected, so everyone else, including the bridesmaids, need to prepare accordingly.

I guess the bridesmaids could just light an Advent candle and wait. But they have other illumination for these nighttime nuptials. Each one carries a lamp, or possibly a torch. Either way, it takes oil to keep it burning. At first, they burn bright, and anticipation is still high. But one hour passes, and then another, and the groom still hasn't shown up. The DJ puts on a tune to help pass the time. Some folks try to cheat and grab an early bite of the reception appetizers. As the evening goes on, the bridesmaids' flames get smaller and their eyelids heavier. After spending all that time and money getting their dresses to fit and their hair just right, now all they want is something to lean on or some place to sit where they can doze off for a while. Who knows when the groom will finally arrive.

There's a traditional gospel blues song, included in several hymnals, called "Keep Your Lamp(s) Trimmed and Burning." It has been attributed to a few different people, and the words vary depending on who's singing it. One version begins: "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, / keep your lamps trimmed and burning, for the time is drawing nigh. Children, don't grow weary, / children, don't grow weary, / children, don't grow weary, / for the time is drawing nigh."

Trimming the wick helps keep the flame clean and bright. But that doesn't do any good if you run out of oil, which is exactly what happens with five of the bridesmaids. When someone grabs the mic and announces they got a call that the groom's car just left the house on its way to the church, all the bridesmaids hop to their feet and prepare to go out and meet him. That's when half of them realize that their flames are going out. The time has come, and now they're unprepared for the procession. They beg the other five to borrow some of their oil, but get told no. There's not enough to go around, so rush out and

try to buy some of your own. The five bridesmaids figure it's worth a try, but no sooner have they left than the groom arrives. By the time they make it back, the ceremony is well underway, and the doors are shut. As the bridesmaids' faces press in toward the camera on the video doorbell, begging to be let in, the groom's voice comes back, "Too late, I don't know you."

Bringing some extra oil. That's what made the difference between the wise ones and the foolish ones. Otherwise, all ten of the bridesmaids were the same. They all were invited. They all arrived on time. They all waited. They all got tired and fell asleep. They all woke up and trimmed their lamps. But half of them failed to bring some extra oil. They weren't ready for the groom's delayed arrival.

Many interpreters believe that this parable is more than just a parable. It's also allegorical, which means that some of its elements represent key parts of what God is doing in Jesus. For instance, the bridesmaids represent the church, the community of disciples. When it comes to external appearances, they all look the same. But God knows that the congregation is really a mixture of wisdom and foolishness. When the delayed groom, Christ, finally arrives, he'll sort out the two, even among those professing to be God's people. In other words, Matthew isn't primarily preaching to humanity in general. He's preaching to the community of Jesus' followers. Some are truly readying themselves, and some are not. Granted, the Lord may be taking longer than expected to return, but eventually his righteous, joyful reign will arrive, and he'll determine who's in and who's out.

The seemingly long period between Christ's first arrival and his final arrival means that the present is our opportunity to prepare, to ready ourselves for the life of the world to come. This doesn't mean withdrawing from the world and hunkering down to focus on calculations about exactly when Jesus will show up, or living as if our objective is escape and survival. A few years ago, a website called Wall Street 24/7 ran an article on the industries that make the most money off of "doomsday preppers." At that time, experts estimated that 3.7 million Americans were classified as preppers, and they wanted to make sure that when the apocalypse comes, they have the basic necessities. According to the article,

[TheReadyStore.com store] sells its READYprep-2000 Food Storage Supply Kit, a 12-month supply of balanced nutrition from freeze-dried foods that are reconstituted with water. The average shelf life: 27 years. The cost: \$3,683.25. Even Costco Wholesale Inc. sells the Chef's Banquet All-Purpose Readiness Kits for \$149.99, with more than 600 servings of premium "just add water" meal options. Its shelf life is 20 years.²

This isn't what Jesus meant when, in the section of Matthew right before today's text, he says, "Therefore you also must be ready ..." (24:44).

For Christians, readying ourselves doesn't mean retreating from the world and stocking up on supplies that will enable us to survive doomsday. When Jesus concludes today's parable by saying, "Therefore keep watch/awake..." he doesn't mean constantly being on the alert for signs of his coming. He's not referring to a kind of vigilance that's always questing for end-time information. What our Lord is actually talking about is responsible discipleship. He's talking about faithful followers who are responsive to the kingdom at all times and who do their duty, day in and day out. In this way, they're prepared for Christ's arrival whenever it happens.

What Jesus says here echoes what he said earlier in Matthew when he warned about false Christians: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out

demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ (7:21-23). This doesn’t mean that you earn your way into the kingdom by doing the will of the Father, but it does mean that readiness is about living the life of the kingdom, especially the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount and at other points in Matthew. This includes abstaining from bad behavior, forgiving others, loving your enemies, standing with the poor and oppressed, loving God and neighbor, caring for fellow Christians, loyalty to the Lord. This is what being “the salt of the earth” (5:13) and “the light of the world” (5:14) looks like.

Our Lord’s emphasis here is on faithful discipleship across time. As one commentator has summarized it, Jesus’ parable stresses the delay in the groom’s arrival, how to handle it, and how to live within it. She says, “We’re constantly in this, ‘How long?’ And the reality is, if we truly recognize the moment that we’re in, then we would have prepared ourselves for not just saying, “I crossed my t’s, I dotted my i’s, I said yes to Jesus, I joined the church, I got baptized, I’m in. But no, being in means you have a task, being the light of the world, and that means that you have to be prepared to do that until the bridegroom returns.”³

C. S. Lewis wrote, “The greatest thing is to be found at one’s post as a child of God, living each day as though it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years.”⁴ Here in Matthew’s Gospel, as Jesus prepares to enter into his own suffering and death, his own end, he shakes us from our slumber and reminds us that being his follower means being his follower for a lifetime. Not only starting with Jesus but sticking with Jesus. Not just claiming his name but continuing in his way, moment by moment, day by day, responding to his call, until he comes.

Preacher William Willimon tells about a visit that an investigative reporter, Philip Haille, made to the French village of Le Chambon, a town whose people, unlike many others in France, hid their Jews from the Nazis during World War II. According to Willimon:

Haille went there, wondering what sort of courageous, ethical heroes could risk all to do such extraordinary good. He interviewed people in the village and was overwhelmed by their ordinariness. They weren’t heroes or smart, discerning people. Haille decided that the one factor that united them was their attendance, Sunday after Sunday, at their little church, where they heard the sermons of Pastor Trochme. Over time, they became by habit people who just knew what to do and did it. When it came time for them to be courageous, the day the Nazis came to town, they quietly did what was right. One old woman, who faked a heart attack when the Nazis came to search her house, later said, “Pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus. When our time came, we knew what to do.”

You may not picture yourself in a situation of that scale and intensity in your life as a disciple. But the reality remains that each day of this time between Christ’s first arrival and his final arrival, you and I are called to do things for Jesus. According to him, living wisely rather than foolishly means being alert, ready, and responsive to the presence of his kingdom in the events, experiences, activities, and relationships of life during this time of waiting. To do that, you and I need to keep enough oil in our lamps through worship, the Word, prayer, praise, work and witness, in the name of the coming Savior.

¹ Reuters, “Wedding guest turns up a year early.” www.reuters.com (July 11, 2007).

² John C. Ogg, “Industries Making the Most Money on Doomsday Preppers.” *24/7 Wall Street* (Updated March 19, 2020).

³ Joy J. Moore, *Brainwave 752*. Working Preacher podcast. November 8, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFpAtI9wSIQ> (December 7, 2023).

⁴ Quoted in *Leadership* (Vol. 10., No 2).