

Hopeful

Matthew 25: 1-13

It's human nature to want to know what's coming next - to be able to have a sense of control and preparation for any possibility.

When we feel we have some level of control, we feel more confident, and even hopeful in what may come next. But what happens when we find ourselves in places where we have little control? How do we find hope in those places where we have little control, where we are stuck waiting and watching to see what happens? What do we do when our best laid plans do not convey the security we hoped for?

In our gospel lesson this week, Jesus tells the story of a wedding party to illustrate what it can be like to live in this liminal space of uncertainty. A rather fitting illustration, I would think. Anybody who has ever been involved with planning and organizing a wedding knows that it is far from a controlled, stress free experience. As a minister, I had several opportunities to be part of planning and execution of those major life events. And while the bride and groom did their best to carefully plan every minute detail, the reality is that something would undoubtedly go wrong. In every wedding I've ever been a part of, that is the one constant. It may not be a major thing, but something will not happen exactly as planned. That was actually part of my premarital counseling to advise to be prepared for the unexpected, because it will happen.

In Jesus' time, the scale of wedding celebrations was much different than what most of us think of in our culture...making the possibility of issues even greater. It was customary for the groom to prepare a place for his bride. Usually, it was 12 months' time - going to his father's house, preparing a room for him and his wife. Often this meant adding onto the house itself, or making some renovations to the house. But sometimes it was a separate house entirely. Now, while 12 months was customary, it could be sooner...it could be later. No one knew when he would come to claim her, so they needed to wait. They needed to be ready. They needed to be prepared.

They did know he would likely come in the middle of the night, as was tradition. It's at this point in the story that Jesus picks up his parable. The bridesmaids are waiting in the middle of the night. They are to be prepared to greet the bridegroom when he arrives, and escort him to the wedding ceremony. And that's an interesting detail in itself. Usually, when the bridegroom's presence would be made known, the bridesmaids would escort the bride to him.

Jesus changes their roles, having the bridesmaids escorting the groom to the bride. This is just one hint of Jesus telling us about the nature of our God - because it's always God who comes to us; always Christ who comes to His bride, not the other way around. At any rate, because they didn't know the precise day or hour of his arrival, they needed to bring along lamps with oil to keep it lit.

When we hear talk of "lamps" in the Bible, we often have the image of a small thing, a little bigger than the size of your hand, with a handle to carry it. Those were for indoor use, though. The lamps mentioned here would be better described as torches on long poles. These sorts of torch-lamps were for outdoor use, especially for such processions. They would trim the strips at the end, drench them in oil, then light it. That would keep it lit for about 15-20 minutes - so they'd need to do it again and again and again. A significant amount of oil would've been needed to stay lit for the length of the procession.

The wedding party had a job to do to prepare for this ceremony! But, as the story goes, not all of the bridesmaids were prepared. And when the bridegroom did arrive, boy were they surprised. "Give us some of your oil," the foolish ones demanded. When they finally made it to the wedding, they were shocked when the groom - the man who had invited them to be part of his wedding party in the first place - denies them. He shuts the door in their face and says, "I never knew you" ...Scary words for a Gospel "good news" reading... "I never knew you".

And so, this parable serves as a warning, a cautionary lesson for us. We are always a bridesmaid, always THE bride - the church - actively preparing for the bridegroom's arrival. Such is the nature and hope of our faith. We live in the promise that like the bridegroom, God is at work, planning the ceremony and preparing a place for us. Yet we live in the anticipation and uncertainty like the wedding party in our story, and often in the anxiety of that uncertainty.

In our faith discussions, we often talk about finding hope in our faith when it doesn't seem like there is any hope to be found in our worldly situation. It can be tough, yet that is the promise of the bulk of the stories in scripture. In all those tales of suffering and adversity, the one constant is God at work, bringing salvation and resolution in the end. Our job is to be prepared, to stay faithful to the journey we are called to, to keep our lamps oiled and trimmed, no matter how dark and hopeless the night may seem. The events of recent weeks – Palestine/Israeli war, Ukraine/Russian war, our political uncertainty, our divisiveness, and hate that have plagued us for years only highlight the hopelessness and anxiety we can feel in this life of waiting. Yet part of keeping our lamps lit is also giving hope to those whose lights have gone out.

Like the members of a wedding party, we are not in charge of ensuring all goes to plan, but we are called to do our part in the ceremony. We are called to keep our lamps lit, to offer the hope and promise of a bright new day at the end of a dark night.

As God's light in this world, we can choose to seek healing, reconciliation, and positive change, or we can let our wicks burn up and our oil run dry, and give in to the pessimism and malaise. Being in a wedding party is not just dressing up and looking pretty, it's being part of something bigger. Our part in this event is finding the hope in our God at work in this world, and sharing that work and hope with others.

What choice will you make in the coming days and months. Will you keep your lamp lit and join in the work, or will you let it go dark? I hope we all find ways to share the love light of our bridegroom, and always keep our lamps lit. Amen.

Keep your lamps filled and your hearts open, ready for the call of God. Go in peace, counting on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the sweet communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.