

"Awake, Alert, and Prepared"

Psalm 78:1-7; Matthew 25:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 16, 2014—6th Sunday after Epiphany—Rev. Ronald Botts

In Matthew 25 we find another of Jesus' parables. Its story line, here as elsewhere, is taken from common life. His parables first require us to engage them at their surface level, then listen for a deeper meaning.

A little background: weddings in the time of Jesus followed age-old traditions leading up to the marriage itself. The climax of the preparations came when the groom arrived to take the bride-to-be from her parents' house. From there the couple went to his family home where the marriage was performed and then food and drink served.

An important duty of the bridesmaids was to stay with the young woman at her parents' house and watch for the arrival of the groom. As soon as he was spotted they would go out to meet him with torches and lamps, accompanying him to the house and to his betrothed. From there the whole party would leave in a procession that would signal the beginning of the wedding.

In this story there were ten bridesmaids. As the narrative unfolds Jesus describes five of them as wise, the other five as foolish. The distinction is that half of them prepared themselves should anything change in the plans, but the rest took no such precautions.

Picking up the parable now it says, "When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps." The lights would only burn so long with the oil they contained. The chamber is rather small and would need to be refilled after a few hours or the flame would go out.

If the groom had arrived as intended, all the bridesmaids would have had enough oil in their lamps to carry out their duties. In this instance, however, the groom is delayed. It gets so late in fact that the bridesmaids, who have presumably already had an exhausting day, all fall asleep.

Suddenly they are awakened by a shout in the courtyard that the groom has been spotted. They scurry around and go out and greet him, but discover that their lamps have burned low and are in need of oil. The five who had come unprepared implore the others to share their supply of oil. The other five decline, however, for if the extra oil is extended ten ways then none will have enough to complete the entire journey. Better five lights burning all the way than ten lamps extinguished *en route*. The best advice they can give the foolish ones is to hurry out and get more oil.

While the unprepared women go out to find a merchant or a neighbor they can arouse, the wedding party leaves because it can delay no longer. When the foolish ones finally arrive at the groom's house they discover the ceremonies and feasting have already begun. They find the door locked and they are excluded from the festivities—all because they were unprepared. Lack of readiness at a crucial time is their downfall.

Jesus' intention likely was that the coming of the Kingdom in its fulfillment is at hand, but its arrival will come as unexpectedly as the midnight appearance of the bridegroom. Therefore, he advised, don't be surprised when it comes, but be ready and prepared to respond. The opportunity could

come and go before some will even be able to move. "Take care," he intimates, "lest your chance is lost.

In the military one of the hardest things for a commander is to keep his troops in a state of readiness. Initially this is not hard to achieve, but the longer that conditions continue and nothing happens, the harder it is to stay alert. It's only human nature to relax back to routine ways. Just when complacency sets in is when the call to respond usually occurs. Battles are often won or lost on this very question of readiness.

In reading about WWII it's clear that much of the time in the South Pacific Theater | was simply waiting. There was work to do to be sure, but most often time dragged out slowly without any action whatsoever. Days melded into each other and boredom was something most soldiers and sailors complained about as they wrote back home. Then, perhaps when engagement was least expected, the enemy let go with everything they had.

Readiness is also crucial in other aspects of life as well. The investor who is not ready to move when the stock market changes stands to lose thousands. The employee who doesn't seize the right time to approach the boss for a raise may find later that she has missed her best chance. The person who loses his concentration at an auction may find that he has let a prized object slip away.

By faith we can be transformed as a result of the working of the Spirit in our lives. In actuality, those inner changes most often come as "transforming moments" or events. Sometimes they're life-changing incidents, or they can also be small but significant experiences. Transforming moments are a gift of God, but they may pass by unnoticed unless we are prepared for them.

Just as the runner must remain alert for the call of the starter, we have to remain alert to the coming of God into our lives. This starts with the conviction that the Spirit is an active presence with us. Most days it may just be an underlying awareness that we are not alone, but on those special times, we may experience God more clearly and closely.

I believe we need to live in active expectation of such moments, and be ready for them. We must be intentional in preparation so that we don't miss the opportunities that God may provide in our lives.

In the story of the ten bridesmaids all of them got distracted from the task of watching for the groom because of tiredness, but some had the foresight to cover the possibility of delay in his arrival—an event over which they had no control. The alert ones put themselves in a position to respond to the unexpected.

Some years ago a certain denomination had a weekly worship service that they broadcast live. Most of the service came from a studio, but the music originated from a nearby church over a telephone link. Just in case there should ever be a problem with the line, they also had a small organ in the studio where a musician was always on stand-by.

Now they had a very capable organist with them in the studio each week. He faithfully practiced the music for the service so, if he should be needed, he would know what to do. Years went by and each week he came to work, sat in the same chair near the small organ, and ended up listening to a flawless connection which linked the church with the station. In some ways it might be seen as the best of all jobs, for the man got paid for doing absolutely nothing.

Then one day the unexpected happened: the electronic hookup with the church went down just moments before air time. Hurriedly the producer alerted the man to the problem and, in less than a minute, they cued the stand-by organist to play the opening hymn to begin the broadcast. Can you guess what happened?

Nothing came out of the instrument, however, for the man literally froze at the keyboard. After so many years of unused performance, he was technically prepared but not mentally ready. He had come to doubt that he would ever be needed, so he couldn't manage to do what was needed at the crucial time.

This could also be the story of the back-up quarterback who is called upon quickly when the first-stringer goes down with injury. It could be the understudy in a long-running play who has to step in when the star loses her voice. It could be anybody in any circumstance whenever there is waiting and watching involved.

Being prepared means to be alert to whatever you're anticipating, whenever it may come. It means taking the needed steps in advance so that you're always ready to react. Then it means doing what you need to do, at the moment when opportunity does arrive. Expectant, ready, responsive... awake, alert, prepared.

I believe there are days where Jesus stops by our door to show us something or lead us somewhere. There are times when he offers us something which we desperately need. There are times when he challenges us to grow in new ways if we will. These are exceedingly special moments and they don't occur every day.

What a shame, though, if our Savior comes to us but we don't have eyes open to see him or the readiness to respond. Just as in the case of the foolish bridesmaids, we could find that we are ready too late or not ready at all.

Listen, then, to this parable as if it is speaking to you—because it does. Be ready for transforming moments that will surely come your way in life. Be ready to respond quickly and fully when they do occur. Don't let them go by unprepared.

When you find the doors of life are opened, you want to be sure that you won't miss out on the celebration that awaits.