

Matt 25:1-13

““Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

In the Name of the One Holy and Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Jesus told this parable to His disciples as they sat on the Mount of Olives. Jesus had been talking over and over about the future, about the “coming day.” His disciples had been asking Him, begging Him, tell us, when will this be? What will be the sign of your coming? What will be the sign of the end of the age?

These questions might sound odd to us, but they would not have sounded unusual to the early hearers of Matthew’s Gospel. They were waiting expectantly for His return. But that has already been delayed beyond what first generation believers anticipated.

And this gospel gives us other questions: why was the bridegroom so late? Why didn’t anyone know where he was? Why did some of the bridesmaids bring enough oil and the others did not. And, why could the ones who were late not get through the door? This parable leaves us with more questions than answers.

This parable is odd and hard to understand. So, if you are confused or uncomfortable, know that you are not alone. I do not like that it ends on rejection. So perhaps, rather than providing answers, this parable is an invitation. It is inviting us to wait.

Waiting is not something that we do particularly well, whether we are at a stoplight or in line at the grocery store. That kind of impatient, foot-tapping waiting is not what is being talked about. The kind of waiting this gospel is encouraging is even harder. It is waiting for something that is way over due, something that we do not know when it will happen.

This gospel is also inviting us to stay awake. Henry David Thoreau, the great American author and poet said, “Only that day dawns to which we are awake.” And that is what these bridesmaids, all of them, the foolish and the wise, are being commanded to do: keep awake! Keep alert! While they were waiting, they fell asleep, they were not paying attention to what is to come, and if we are not paying attention, how can we even know we are waiting for something?

Let us admit that waiting for Jesus’ imminent return is difficult for us to fathom. But let us also recognize that opportunities for waiting on Jesus’ presence are all around us. Each time we work for justice, we testify to the presence of Jesus. Each time we bear one

another's burdens, we testify to Jesus' presence. Each time we advocate for the poor, befriend the friendless, or work to make this world that God loves a better place, we testify to the presence of the risen Christ. And so, we pass on our faith to our children and to those we love. We rely upon each other as a community and upon the best of our traditions to sustain us when doubt and fatigue overwhelm us. We forgive one another's sins, we study scripture, we baptize people into a new identity and we share a meal to affirm the sustenance that God provides. We try to remain awake to what God is doing, alert to the moments in our lives when Christ is present.

But staying awake is a challenge, our minds get clouded by unnecessary things. Despite their differing levels of preparation, both the wise and the foolish bridesmaids fall asleep. Preparation is clearly important here. It is the distinction between the "wise" bridesmaids and the "foolish" ones. The wise bridesmaids were prepared, they brought plenty of oil, and the foolish ones did not.

It is easy enough, in fact too easy I fear, to separate the world into two camps: foolish people and wise people. The foolish ones are the ones who are not ready for God and not welcome in the kingdom of heaven. The wise ones are the smart, perfect, prepared ones who will be welcomed in with open arms. But perhaps we are not one set of bridesmaids or another, perhaps we are both. Perhaps we are foolish and wise. In one moment, on one day, prepared and ready and awake. Thoughtful, focused, wise. Then in another moment we are caught up and foolish, forgetful of God and unprepared to deal with the presence of God in our lives. Then again, we can be attentive, in the moment and alive.

All ten bridesmaids fell asleep, there was no distinction between wise and foolish there. Perhaps wisdom and foolishness do not exist at opposite poles, rather, like dark and light, faith and doubt, divine absence and divine presence, they exist with and within each other, like distinct waves that roll out of the same ocean, and roll back into it again.

I am a Harry Potter fan and there is a scene in the fifth book, the Order of the Phoenix, that emphasizes this theme. Harry Potter, who is now 15 years old, is confused by all the dark and angry feelings he is having (which have been occurring because of his connection with Voldemort, the evil dark wizard). Harry worries that he might be capable of this evil and confides in his godfather, Sirius Black. Sirius, who comes from a family chock-full of bad guys, of death eaters, tells Harry this, "You're not a bad person. You're a very good person to whom bad things have happened. Besides, he says, the world isn't split into good people and death eaters. We've all got both light and dark inside of us. What really matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are."

What if we all have wisdom and foolishness inside of us? And while we are waiting, both are apt to come out at one time or another. But, perhaps we can make a conscious

choice to stay awake to the presence of God. Even when we feel God's absence and we urgently pray for God to come to us, we are witnessing to the promise that God will come. Yes, we want the wait to be over, but at the same time we trust that God will show up. If our waiting is in fear, God comes in peace. If it is in longing, God arrives with deep satisfaction.

If we remain alert to the moment that is in front of us, then we can feel the presence of God. And if we do not (and that is okay) we know, in our alertness and awake-ness, that is when we need to seek the presence of God.

And the fact remains that most of the action in this parable takes place on this side of the door, in a world that waits, in a world that suffers as it waits. Where we stand today, sometimes overcome by sleepiness, no banquet door has been shut yet. This means opportunity, we have the chance to stay awake to God's presence.

I want to encourage you, and by encouraging you, I am also encouraging myself. In this next week, try, at least once a day, to stop. Take five deep breaths and wake yourself up to the moment that you are in and to the presence of God that is with you in that moment.

And so, we are called to keep awake, keep alert. But to wait does not mean to recognize the absence of God. It means to recognize our absolute dependence on the presence of God. Rather than keep alert for what is to come, keep alert for the ways in which God enters our present attempts at alertness, at waiting, and seems to bring us just what we need.

Amen.