

Sunday, November 5, 2023 **“Getting ready?”**

***1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Matthew 25:1-13***

The Christmas parade in central North Carolina took place every year early in December. There were many elaborate floats passing by the crowds on the streets. But then there was suddenly a simple hay wagon pulled by a tractor going by. On the wagon are several fraternity boys from the university. They are madly sawing boards and nailing things together. The puzzled expressions of the onlooker's faces changed to laughter when they read the sign on the back of the wagon. It read: "We thought the parade was next week!" They were just not ready for the parade but went anyway! Isn't that just how it is? There is a time to prepare, and there is a deadline after which nothing will do. Either you're ready or you're not!

This is the case in the parable of the ten bridesmaids. But before we look at the story, one must first understand some historical background of a first-century Jewish wedding. A Jewish wedding had three parts or stages to it. First, there was the formal engagement/betrothal which was almost always arranged by the parents of the future bride and groom. Later (up to a year or more) came the formal religious ceremony in the bride's home. This was a religious service similar to our wedding service. Thirdly, there was the wedding banquet (feast), generally at night, at the house of the groom and it generally lasted about seven days and could take place right after the ceremony or weeks later. The bridegroom would come to get his bride and they would walk together to the wedding. It was an elaborate affair that cost a lot of money. It was, therefore, a social event to which their friends were anxious to attend. The bride and the groom walked down the street and their bridesmaids would take part in the 'welcoming ceremony' by lighting the way with lamps held by the wedding party. It would be a major faux pas for anyone in the wedding party not to be by the road ready to welcome the bridegroom and bride.

This is what Jesus illustrates in this teaching. There are ten young women waiting to join the wedding party. They are expecting and waiting for the bridegroom and the bride to come along soon. Five of the maidens are called foolish the others are wise. Maybe this is because the five wise ones had been part of this 'welcoming ceremony' before and knew that they might have to wait a long time for the couple to come. Maybe they also knew how far they were coming and just planned ahead just in case it got really late before their arrival. The foolish ones probably were unsure of the couple's plans for the evening nor how far they would be coming from. They did not know to pack extra oil for their lamps. We just don't know about these 10 women.

As the story goes, the bridegroom was delayed and the welcoming ceremony was as well. They all fell asleep. At midnight the call came out that the bridegroom was coming. It was time to welcome him. Yet the foolish ones had let their lamps burn out of oil while they slept and they had no oil to light the way. They asked for the wise women to share their oil but they refused noting that they had prepared and stated that there would not be enough for all. The wise women sent the others at midnight to go buy more oil. This seemed like a crazy idea- for who would be open at midnight to do this?

But they went to buy the oil. While they were gone, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet. They were ready to celebrate with the wedding couple and to go to a party. The door was shut. Later, the other foolish bridesmaids came and pounded on the door, "let us in." The response was "I do not know you." Then Jesus states, "Keep awake for you know neither the day or the hour."

There are different ideas of being prepared for what is to come but also what Jesus is referring to regarding 'not knowing the day or the hour'.

Some of you might remember the year 1999 and the fear that something big was going to happen to all the computer systems and even a possible 'end of the world' as the clock struck midnight on Dec.31. it was known as Y2K . People had stockpiled food, fuel and yes toilet paper. But nothing happened yet one thing was certain- there was fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of what would happen, and fear of would it make a difference if they lived through it all.

As we enter into these last weeks of this Church year our focus is on being prepared, investing in the right things, and helping those who are in need of support. It is in these days leading up to The Reign of Christ that we pull together Jesus' teachings of what we are called to do with what the Spirit's leads us to do here and now. Sometimes these teachings are very clear other times, it is uncertain. But what we share leads us to a new perspective of God in our lives as we seek His Kingdom and know Christ as Saviour.

Our reading from I Thessalonians 4 is also a statement about being ready. Even during Paul's time of establishing churches in Jesus name, people believed that Christ would return very soon. And so Paul describes that day-the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet will rejoice and the dead in Christ will rise. All believers will be caught up together and meet Christ as one. This is what he wrote so that they would not fear the challenges and changes of the times to come. Paul didn't know the future back then; neither do we today. He did not know

when Jesus would return but he taught the message of being prepared, not just getting ready but being ready.

When we look at this parable of readiness for a wedding ceremony and Christ's return, we might want to focus not only on our eschatological hope, but on our own mortality. We know that the fall flu/ cold/ pneumonia and covid season is here as preventive shots are now available. But just think about these other things we do to be prepared. We make a family "escape plan" for getting out of the house if it catches fire. We keep an emergency roadside kit in the trunk of our car. Our children take part in "fire drills" and "emergency evacuations." And some of us are "prepared" enough to stockpile bottled water, canned foods, prescriptions medications, batteries and blankets just in case we have a blizzard. We buy new snow boots, jackets and gloves before the first snowfall. And yet what is it we are preparing for? Just to exist.

There's a true story that comes from the sinking of the Titanic. A frightened woman found her place in a lifeboat that was about to be lowered into the raging North Atlantic. She suddenly thought of something she needed, so she asked permission to return to her stateroom before they cast off. She was granted three minutes or they would leave without her. She ran across the deck that was already slanted at a dangerous angle. She raced through the gambling room with all the money that had rolled to one side, ankle deep. She came to her stateroom and quickly pushed aside her diamond rings and expensive bracelets and necklaces as she reached to the shelf above her bed and grabbed three small oranges. She quickly found her way back to the lifeboat and got in. Now that seems incredible because thirty minutes earlier she would not have chosen a crate of oranges over the smallest diamond. But death had boarded the Titanic. One blast of its awful breath had transformed all values. Instantaneously, priceless things had become worthless. Worthless things had become priceless. And in that moment she preferred three small oranges to a crate of diamonds. The woman on the sinking Titanic understood, in the light of her current circumstances, that she must make preparations for living on a lifeboat. Diamonds would not suffice, only the precious resources of an orange were good enough. This woman was determined to survive.

Just for a moment ponder this: what are you preparing for right now? What if it changed to something different like being prepared for . . . joy? What about being prepared for . . . pleasure? What about being prepared for . . . blessings? The traditional Scout motto is "Be prepared" which taught generations of young people useful skills which were put into practice by going fishing, rock climbing, toasting marshmallows over a campfire, pitching a tent all for fun. They were preparing for good times, not just bad. As Christians we are called to "be

prepared”—but not just for all those “trials and tribulations” that grab the headlines. Jesus wants us to be “prepared,” so that we can party with him for all of eternity! Are you prepared to party?

And behold, all of the maidens slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry: Behold the bridegroom. Come and see him." Those bridesmaids who were prepared Jesus called wise. Could he say that of you?

Let us pray

God of grace we praise you and thank you that we may be prepared to be called by you. We do not know when you will call us home but we pray that we are yours through faith and that you love us always. Prepare us O God move into our hearts and call us to serve you in faith. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.