

Sunday, November 12, 2017

Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Romans 8:31-32

Matthew 25:1-13

### If God is For Us?

In these last weeks we have been hearing the story of the people of Israel—former slaves who served in Egypt and how they traveled through desert lands for many years in order to be ready to enter the Promised Land of God. Joshua was Moses' successor and in last week's reading the people crossed the Jordan River into the land God had promised to their forefathers several generations before. They have entered this land knowing that they would have to enter into battles with the people who lived in this area. There were victories and defeats on both sides as Joshua lead them and there were discussions and compromises made as the people lived and moved amongst the land to settle it. At Shechem Joshua brought all the tribes of Israel together and he recounted their history and what they had accomplished in the most recent times. He also asked them to make very important decisions about whom they would serve- the God of their ancestors or the god of those people where they now live. Joshua then told them to choose whom they will serve and then he stated as for me and my household we will serve the Lord. The people discussed among themselves what they would do and they responded, "We will serve the Lord!" For they knew that God was with them and their ancestors, they needed to only trust in Him and they would live long and prosper.

Sometimes it is difficult to serve God and to live as Christians. In our Western culture we are not as familiar with these difficulties because we have rights and freedoms to have faith and worship God. However we fail to realize that persecution is real in many nations. Christianity has grown in many countries even under oppression and in many cases violence. Yet here in Canada our secular society seems to be growing stronger and so we must ask why? Where is our faith and whom do many Canadians serve?

We have heard of international news stories about attacks and murders of people dying for their faith. In Iraq, ISIS, the terrorist group, have given many Christians the ultimatum of leaving their homeland or being killed. Many die as martyrs but most often they leave their homelands and seek refuge in order to live out their faith in God. But there is hope because some Iraqi forces with international assistance have begun to reclaim parts of the country that were previously lost. In some areas, Christians have returned to their villages and reclaimed them with celebrations of joy and wonder of God's love.

In India attacks against Christians occur in 23 states. People are arrested for their faith and there is possible loss of life, job or social relationship. Yet there are churches growing exponentially if they hear Christ's message being shared. People are risking their lives for their faith in God and in Jesus Christ for they have found in Him, hope.

But what about you? Do you know this Jesus that people are willing to risk knowing and worshiping even though it could mean death or imprisonment? How faithful are you and are you prepared to share it and show your faith?

In Canada this week, the Members of Parliament were warned by many church leaders to keep their hands off the law prohibiting the disruption of a religious service. Bill C-51 is the work of the Commons justice committee whose task is to clean up the Criminal Code by removing sections that are outdated or redundant. Yet, the Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the B'nai Brith Canada groups are urging this group to keep the section which makes it illegal to "obstruct a clergyman or minister from celebrating divine service or to wilfully disrupt an assemblage of persons met for religious worship or for a moral, social or benevolent purpose." It has been decided that this section will remain but with updated language so that it will clearly capture all forms of religious and spiritual services. (Windsor Star, Nov 10, 2017 p.NP3) But what if these groups did not raise concerns? Would it make a difference for our churches and laws? Would it make a difference to you?

Our Gospel reading today is a parable that Jesus told his listeners who would know the local traditions about wedding celebrations. At that time, wedding receptions were held over a few days and would involve the guests moving locations and taking time for rest and then sharing again in celebration. . It was a tradition to light the path of the bridegroom to the reception hall by young unmarried women, maidens or virgins. The maidens in Jesus' story are of different ages because 5 of them have been involved in a wedding before and they came prepared with lamps, oil and extra oil to burn. Those who have not participated in such an event were not prepared to wait as long and did not bring extra fuel for their lamps. These young women want to enter the celebration as the community gathered to celebrate the marriage and so that they would meet people themselves.

In Jesus' story all of the maidens take lamps to meet the bridegroom but he was a long time in coming and so they fell asleep. At midnight the cry came that he was arriving for the celebration so the girls woke up and trimmed their lamps. But the ones who had no oil asked the others to share theirs. They were refused. These wise maidens told the others that if they were

to share, there may not be enough for all. They tell them to go buy more. We're not sure where they are going to go get oil at midnight but while they were away the bridegroom arrived. Those women who were ready and had lit their lamps and welcomed the groom. They went into the wedding banquet and the door was shut. After a while, the others returned and they wanted to enter the hall. Banging on the locked doors, the bridegroom responded: "I don't know you." He refused to let them in.

Jesus shares this story so that we might understand that we need to be ready for whatever is to come. We need to be ready for changes and challenges ahead in our own lives and mostly we need to be ready for when Jesus will call us home to him. If we are not prepared, he will simply say, "I don't know you."

There are many people around the world coming to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Some people are reluctant to share their love of God because they are afraid of death or being told to leave the country. Others are being oppressed, persecuted and even questioned for no apparent reason other than saying I follow Jesus. But why is this? Because Jesus is calling them to be ready for when he returns and when he will call them home. Jesus offers love, hope, peace and joy. And for many this is more than they could even imagine.

Today we have witnessed and promised Michael and Grace and their children that we will be their church family because they believe in God in Jesus and in the Spirit that is present with us today. We as a church family need to understand that this is important and special and holy—sacred waters of baptism have been poured and sprinkled amongst us all. We need to ask in considering Paul's words in Romans 8, what is our relationship with God? God gave Jesus up for us all so that we might choose to follow, be reconciled, forgiven and then promised eternal life. But do we believe this? If God has done all these things for us, who is against us? No one, unless we turn away.

Do you know God and do you serve the Lord? Do you believe in Jesus the one who is who was and will be with us forevermore? Are you ready to meet him when he returns or calls you home? God loves you are you willing to say yes to Christ?

The bridegroom did not allow the unprepared maidens into the reception. He said, "I do not know you." Does Jesus know you by name? Does Jesus know you as his faithful follower? Have you professed your faith in Him and are you prepared for his coming to call you home? Do you know Jesus as the one who lived and died and lives again? And do you know God's goodness to you? These are foundational questions of faith and as we grow closer together as

God's family here in Glenwood—we need to remember that we are one in Christ and one with each other. Let us rejoice in this for as for me and this church family of Glenwood United, we serve the Lord.

Let us pray.

Holy God we lift up to you in praise and prayer our brothers and sisters around the world who are persecuted, oppressed, punished and killed for believing in you and your Son Jesus Christ. We pray that they will be safe and their lives may be spared so that their faithful witness will be made clear to others.

As we rejoice in the celebration of professing faith in you we ask your blessing upon this church family which continues to touch the lives of others. In faith and with thanksgiving we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.