

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
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During these weeks immediately after the election and before we enter into the season of Advent, we will be engaging in a sermon series entitled "Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God." This theme comes in part from the 3 parables of Jesus in Matthew 25 that we will be working with during the next several weeks in which Jesus tells stories about what the kingdom of God is like. The theme is also a reminder that our *hope* is never in princes or presidential candidates or horses or chariots or defensive weapons of any kind. For those who have pledged themselves to Jesus, who have been baptized into the living waters of Jesus Christ, our hope is not in achieving outcomes that align with our own agendas. Our hope is in our King Jesus, and our *ethics* follow from that. This both lifts our hearts above the anxieties and fears of the moment, and it drives us deeper into the suffering of the world, where we believe God's new future will be given.

On this first day of our series, we are given two texts that may strike us sophisticated Presbyterians as a little strange. 1 Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 25, which Leslie read for us, both orbit around the concept of the return of Jesus, the second coming of Jesus. This is a concept and a notion that we're not quite sure what to do with. Typically, when asked what we think about the second coming, Presbyterians mumble a few things and then try to move the conversation onto something else. When the Bible talks about the return of Christ, the Bible uses parables and images that are mysterious and elusive. There will be trumpets and clouds; there will be a bridegroom whose coming is delayed; we can wonder what all of this has to do with living in the polarized Washington, DC, metro area in the midst of a global pandemic at the end of 2020. (It's a good question.)

On the one hand, we want to take the biblical text seriously, and do not want to simply dismiss and ignore these texts that don't make sense within our intellectual categories. But on the other hand, we want to interpret them responsibly, without using passages about the end-times as weapons to threaten people who don't follow these texts.

When working with these kinds of texts in the New Testament – and there are a number of these passages – there are a couple of 3-dollar words that can be helpful in reading these passages intelligently. One is the Greek word *Parousia* – p-a-r-o-u-s-i-a. *Parousia* is the word that is translated as 'coming' in the passage from 1 Thessalonians

that Leslie read, about those who are 'left until the *coming* of the Lord.' When we talk about Jesus' coming, we are talking about his *Parousia*. *Parousia* happened to be the word that was used during that time to refer to the coming of an emperor or a king to an area, and it corresponded to the Latin word *advent*. When a royal figure was coming to an area, the area would typically prepare for their *advent*, their *Parousia*, in any number of ways. Those images of the coming of a king are taken here and applied to the return of Jesus.

The second word that is useful to know is the word "eschatology," which has to do with the study of the "eschaton," or the last things. Eschatology reflects on where we are going, where we are heading, as a way of allowing that future to inform the present. One scholar has written that "Eschatology ... is not to be thought of merely as a speculative venture in which curious religious people gamble on a time when the world will end. Eschatology provides the framework for ethics, the context within which believers are called to right conduct."¹

When we turn our attention to our parable in Matthew 25, we are told of 10 bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. According to NT teacher Stan Saunders, it may well be that these "lamps" were torches, made of oil-soaked rags, which would be made to light up. But while the bridesmaids are just waiting, the torches would not be lit. For after being lit, the oil in the rags may only last a few minutes.² If that is the case, then the problem with the 5 so-called foolish bridesmaids is not that they did not bring enough extra oil for a long night of waiting, but that they did not bring any oil at all.

In any event, the text says that bridegroom's return is *delayed*. This may well be a reference to the way that, by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, the return of Christ – which was expected rather imminently when 1 Thessalonians was written (several decades earlier in the first century) – had not yet happened. While they are waiting, all 10 of the bridesmaids get drowsy and fall asleep. When the bridegroom's return is announced, the 5 bridesmaids who have brought oil go out to meet him, while those who did not take advantage of the bridegroom's delay to get ready for him are left outside. The bridegroom says to all of them and to us, "Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

As we said earlier, this is a strange parable, and the exclusionary behavior of the bridegroom at the end may make us more than a little uncomfortable. So we may need to sit with this text, let it work on us, while we work on it. But what we may draw from this text is that in our moment, in the polarized Washington, DC, metro area in the

¹ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary, based on the NRSV* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 553.

² Stanley Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 253.

midst of a global pandemic at the end of 2020, as we move forward into the next chapter of our lives together, we are invited to practice the *discipline of readiness*; to “keep awake;” in the words of the spiritual, “to keep our lamps trimmed and burning,” to keep fresh and full the oil of faithfulness and courage and compassion. What we will soon realize is that the *discipline of readiness* is actually made up of a collection of what Walter Brueggemann calls “*disciplines of readiness*,”³ practices of faith by which we turn our expectations and our affections away from the seductive threats of the world’s empires, and turn them towards the neighborly, hopeful practices and promises of God’s kingdom. Developing this collection of “disciplines of readiness” is something that we could fruitfully work on together. I will mention three that occur to me for our moment; each of these three is counter-cultural, and cuts deeply against the norms of our world.

The first is to practice the *discipline of prayer and silence*, as an alternative to the habit of noise. You and I are surrounded by noise, by talking heads, by elevator music, by podcasts and arguments and a constant barrage of advertisements. As we cultivate our hearts so that we are ready for Jesus’ kingdom, we need to spend time in silence. Many teachers say that silence is God’s native language, and silence invites us to a space that we cannot control or manage, but in which our souls can grow.

The second is to practice the discipline of attentiveness to the poor, as an alternative to the economics of perpetual accumulation. Habits of accumulation are driven by anxiety about scarcity, fears that we might run out, and thus to a greed that hoards resources and privilege at the expense of the neighbor. Attentiveness to the poor will reshape our politics, our churches, our neighborhoods, and our world.

The third is to practice the discipline of attentiveness to the enemy and the opponent, as an alternative to the demonization of those who see things differently than we do. As the results of this week’s election continue to unfold, one thing that seems clear is that we are a deeply divided country. This is not new, but it is now unmistakable. If we are to move forward, we will need to move forward together, which is going to require us to deal with our neighbors who see things differently. The church is going to be one of the few places in our society that is equipped to lead this practice.

We will need to develop other disciplines, but all three of these “habits of the heart” – silence, attentiveness to the poor, attentiveness to the enemy – will be features of God’s kingdom of contemplative mystery, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. When Jesus comes again, when the Parousia occurs, God’s kingdom will come in all of its fullness. Practicing these disciplines now will prepare us to welcome that kingdom with joy and gladness. To God and to God alone be all the glory. Amen.

³ Walter Brueggemann, “Disciplines of Readiness,” available at <https://www.walterbrueggemann.com/resources/writings/>.

