

Sermon: Ready or Not

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

8 November 2020

Based on **Joshua 3:7-17; 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13**

Believe it or not, today's two readings from the Book of Joshua form a backdrop to our Gospel reading from Matthew. What began long ago with a crossing over the Reed Sea ended forty years later with a crossing over the River Jordan. 'Crossing over' symbolizes a transition from one state of being to another – and it's a one-way trip because you can never go back.

Having endured forty years of physical and spiritual wandering and after repeatedly testing the Lord as their trust and reliance on God grew – what we might call 'faith development' – all the tribes of Israel, Abraham's descendants, finally are a nation, united under God. With God's intervention, the Israelites crossed the River Jordan into the land promised to them by God.

You probably noticed how we skipped the middle and went right to the end. The Book of Joshua is more about how the people made Canaan into their new home, setting us up for the rest of the story of Israel's life in the land, as told in Judges through Second Kings. The bottom line here is that the entire people reiterated their commitment to living according to the covenant, to be faithful, and to serve the Lord.

Before we get to Matthew, let's talk a bit about parables and how and when Jesus told them. And to do that, I'm adding a modern context.

Those of us of a certain age might remember a band called The Grateful Dead. They made a lot of music and recorded a lot of music. They also went off on long tours and they were better as a live act than they were in the studio; they played almost 2800 concerts. The point is, how many times did they perform *Truckin'* or *Sugar Magnolia*?

Pete Townshend, the guitarist, singer, and composer for one of my favorite bands, The Who, once said that after they hit it big, their fans would call out songs for them to play during concerts, especially a song called *Magic Bus*.

After a while, the band got sick of playing *Magic Bus* but their fans always wanted to hear it, so Townshend said, “All right – let’s play it early in the show and be done with it.” Then their fans started yelling, “Play *Magic Bus* **again!**”

In the course of his ministry, we can imagine Jesus telling a given parable in more than one place and for different audiences. The parable he tells today about the ten bridesmaids appears only in Matthew’s Gospel and could have been told many times. What’s significant is where in his narrative Matthew put it and the two that follow.

Early in chapter 24, the disciples asked Jesus, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Then Jesus told them about the coming destruction of the Temple and about the signs of the end times – false Messiahs, earthquakes and famines, widespread suffering – and the necessity for watchfulness because we won’t know the day and the hour when heaven and earth will pass away. Scary stuff.

That sets the stage for three parables about readiness for the coming of the Son of Man. Chapter 25 begins with Jesus saying, “Then” – or *at that time* – “the kingdom of heaven will be like this.”

Ten bridesmaids went to meet the bridegroom. Their job was simple: meet him – and the bride – and welcome them into the household. The bridegroom was delayed, so they all took a nap. But at midnight – between darkness and dawn; today and tomorrow; now and then – he arrived, and then things started getting exciting.

So, all the bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. To trim a lamp is to turn the wick up or down to regulate the amount of flame – if the lamp is empty of oil, it doesn’t matter how much you trim it; the lamp will go out. The wise bridesmaids advised the foolish ones to go buy more oil – at midnight! And they did.

When they came back later, not only were they refused entry, but the bridegroom did not recognize them, which makes one wonder if they were really bridesmaids at all. They were foolish because they were unprepared even though they knew what was coming. They naively assumed that someone would bail them out.

Here’s how most of us think about readiness. Let’s say you’re the second-string quarterback for a professional football team. The starting quarterback is injured halfway through the third quarter and your team is losing. Coach puts you in there to save the day. Are you ready? If not, your team loses.

Or the Weather Channel forecasts a hurricane or a nor'easter, and it's headed right for your house. Do you have all that you might need on hand to weather the storm? If not, why not? You knew it was coming. You should have been prepared.

We don't often think about our faith that way. We put off making that final, irreversible crossing until the storm hits, or the QB goes down, or the bridegroom arrives.

Jesus said, "At that time, the kingdom of heaven will be like this." He also said to "keep watch, therefore;" stay awake; be prepared; be alert. All of this suggests a long delay, plenty of time to get ready. Buy your oil before midnight.

Matthew tells this story toward the end of his Gospel which suggests that he's reflecting the early church's nervousness and anxiety about Jesus' delayed but expected return. In their mind, it should have happened already: "Where is he? He's late; is he coming at all?" No one ever said impatience was a virtue.

As it stands, how is this parable a description of the kingdom of heaven?

But what if we lifted the parable out of Matthew's end times context? What if Jesus liked to tell this parable in the morning wherever he went? Could he have had some other meaning in mind?

If we leave the first and last verses behind, what would the parable sound like then? Ten bridesmaids are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom and the start of a celebration you would usually associate with a wedding. Maybe the foolish ones just can't wait to get started, like football fans who arrive at the stadium hours before kickoff, just so they can get the grille going and hang with their friends.

Then the parable becomes more about watching for a party; God's arrival will be joyful, and you wouldn't want to miss it. The question is, are you ready for a long delay?

This is what the kingdom of heaven is like: it's always on the way. The challenge is to have enough lamp oil on hand for when the bridegroom appears because that's when the party starts, and you want to be there.

If we go back to Matthew's end times context, the next two parables teach similar lessons. There is always judgment but also grace. Is redemption impossible? Should you, the second-string quarterback, play next week after blowing your big chance? You would want another shot at it, for sure.

The Gospel's message is complex. The Gospel teaches that it's never too late to buy more oil; it's never too late to straighten out our lives; it's never too late to cross the River to the Promised Land. And it's never too late to turn to God in faith.

Though it may seem as if there are long stretches when it looks as if God is absent, that is not the case. The very last words Jesus spoke in Matthew's Gospel, the words that end the story and close the book, are these:

“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20).

Despite the delay, despite his apparent absence, Jesus is in our midst whenever we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger. Maybe that's all we need to do to prepare for the wedding banquet. And keep watch, because you never know.

Amen.



* * * * *