

Sermon: Keep Awake

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 25:1-13**

We're just a few weeks away from Advent, so in a church sense, we're getting ready to get ready, which is what the passage from Matthew is all about.

At the beginning of the previous chapter, the disciples asked Jesus, 'What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' Jesus warned them about false messiahs; natural disasters like earthquakes and famines; persecutions; and things like that. But, he said, 'the *end* is not yet.' The one who endures will be saved, which is the good news of the kingdom proclaimed throughout the world, and *then* the end will come.

It will be unexpected, and it will arrive swiftly. And today, Jesus said, '*Then* the kingdom of heaven will be like *this*,' a parable about watchfulness and judgement.

We in the modern era are all waiting for Jesus' Second Coming – we missed it the first time and wouldn't want to miss it again. But Jesus walked with the disciples every day. What prompted them to ask about the end of the age? Everything seemed fine when they first arrived in Jerusalem.

But Jesus went into the Temple to teach and all of a sudden, he's being challenged and tested, and that's when the disciples realize that things are getting serious.

On their way out of the Temple, Jesus looked around and said, 'You see all of this? It's all going to come down.' And the disciples began wondering when that might be. Now, when Matthew wrote his Gospel, he already knew that the Romans had destroyed the Temple in the year 70, so Jesus' 'prediction' is kind of a slam dunk.

After the Resurrection, after Jesus ascended to heaven, there was speculation about his promised return. 'We know he just left, *but* – when's he coming back?'

In the same way that Jews today wait expectantly for Elijah's return, so too do Christians await Jesus' second coming. In the first century, everyone expected Jesus to return in their lifetimes. And it didn't happen. These passages from Matthew are a response to those diminished expectations.

Now, the Day of the LORD was literally a ‘day of God’s appearing,’ or a *theophany*. This mention by Amos is the first written record of ‘the day of the LORD,’ about 800 years before Jesus, and that’s what the early Christ followers were expecting.

The entire book of Amos is about how unhappy God is with foreign powers such as Assyria taking advantage of their weaker neighbors; with Judea, the southern kingdom; and with Israel, in the north, where Amos preached. Today’s passage is directed at Israel, whose capital at the time was Samaria.

The Israelites of Amos’ time expected vindication against their enemies on the Day of the LORD, but Amos knew that the LORD would bring judgement to Israel too. It will be a dark day, and not a good one, much like the closed-door judgement in Matthew.

So, here are two readings that emphasize God’s expected arrival, except in one God is really angry, and in the other, God drops a very important hint to *keep watch*.

Matthew tells us it was midnight. According to Jewish timekeeping, then and now, ‘midnight’ is halfway between yesterday and ‘not yet.’

Between those extremes – midnight – the delayed bridegroom will appear. He’s late not because he’s lazy or delinquent – he was *delayed*; something held him up. And it’s none of our business.

Also interesting in this passage is the line, ‘you had better go to the dealers and buy some [oil] for yourselves’ – at midnight? That’s another clue that we’re not talking about human time here; remember, ‘*then* the kingdom of heaven will be like *this*.’

Another thing: where is the bride? It was the custom for bridesmaids to await the arrival of the groom when he came to take his bride to his house. If this is an allegory with Israel as the bride, then some failed to keep trust while others remained vigilant.

In any case, good luck finding oil when all the shops are closed.

The Amos reading includes one of my favorite Bible verses; I have it on a pin that I wear on my jacket: ‘Let justice *roll down* like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’ Earlier in the chapter, ironically, God told Israel, ‘You who turn justice into wormwood and hurl righteousness to the ground’ – seek the LORD and live! Apparently, they got the message.

God *wants* justice; God *wants* righteousness, for *everybody*, and not just every now and then, like a streambed that only flows during the Spring rains, but always.

We should want it too, as part of any society's covenant and kept consistently and regularly, but history tells us that this is not always the case. But societies can choose. By *letting* justice roll down and righteousness flow, we are choosing to make it happen.

In Amos' time, about 2800 years ago, Israel had imposed taxes on the poor; bribery and corruption was common; religious practices had become empty rituals. Amos wrote that, 'at such a time the prudent man keeps silent, for it is an evil time' (5:13). You might get hurt if you point out bad behavior to the wrong people.

By writing it, Amos proved he was not a prudent man.

There are people, then and now, who would like to operate in the dark and not in the light. They would like to avoid justice, at least for themselves. And maybe for you too, if you owe them money or if they just don't like you.

Judgements will be rendered. Truth will out.¹ The day of the LORD has already arrived for some. For the rest of us, it's still a few minutes before midnight.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that we are called to 'serve a God who never stops calling people to do *more* justice and love *more* mercy,' and simultaneously to serve our neighbors who, 'nine times out of ten are just looking for a safe place to rest.' We know that things are not as they should be, and yet we care for the way they are.²

Can we endure Jesus' absence? It might be a long time, according to Matthew, so be ready, be watchful. And, from Amos, we know what to do in the meantime to help build God's kingdom on Earth, in the here and now.

When we orient ourselves to what God expects – justice, righteousness – when we look at every situation from God's point of view, we begin to see the world differently, and that leads to self-knowledge, re-evaluation, and transformation, aka repentance.

A Scottish theologian named John McFadyen wrote that if we think of justice as being fair play between people, then, 'Let justice, in that sense, run through society, unimpeded by avarice or selfishness or cruelty, let it roll on without let or hindrance like the waves of the sea; let it roll on unintermittently, all the year round, whatever be the political weather; let it roll on "like a perennial stream," which even in the fiercest heat of summer never dries up.'³

Religion and the religious life are just not a matter of rites and ceremonies, or of rote prayers and practices, but it must express itself in our social life, where true service

to God means helping the needy, feeding the hungry, and fairness and integrity in all our dealings with our neighbors. These are things we know how to do.

We have plenty of oil in our collective lamps. The time is always right to do God's will, and may the LORD help us distinguish between darkness and light, and between despair and hope.

Time may be short. Tell the ones you love you love them.

And while we wait for the bridegroom's return, we are called to keep awake and remain faithful.

Amen.

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¹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1596.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (HarperOne, 2012).

³ John E. McFadyen, *A Cry for Justice* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1912).