***WHILE YOU ARE WAITING…***

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Texts: Matthew 25:1-13 and Amos 5:18-24

 What a week it has been? Just when you thought that 2020 could not possibly get any weirder, we have a contested presidential election that left us all wondering who the next president would be and still wondering when it will be official. While we rejoice that the deluge of snarky political ads are now behind us – at least until the next governor’s race – we are left to wait and wonder: what next? We are generally pretty good at wondering about the possibilities; we are not as good about waiting. In our 5G fast-food world we expect instant results and speedy service. Waiting for anything is a challenge, but waiting for results in a presidential election has really tested our patience! As the headline in an article in Friday’s *Washington Post* put it, “*As days stretch on, we’re forced to practice our least favorite virtue: Patience*.” The author writes:

*The waiting is worse than the wanting, some voters say. And Americans in particular are an impatient bunch, according to psychologists who study patience and self-control. “Americans have a hard time waiting,” said Dominik Guess, a psychology professor at the University of North Florida. “Immediate gratification is an important part of our culture. Children are taught to expect things right away. And it’s especially hard to wait when something is highly important and we’ve invested our values in it.”….Many people say they are losing sleep, unable to work or falling into stress-eating to get through to a final result. “We have lost some of our capacity to wait,” said Sarah Schnitker, a Psychologist at Baylor University who studies patience. [[1]](#endnote-1)*

The article was written just two days after the election – and here we are at day five! That restlessness coupled with the rise in COVID cases attributable, at least in part, to COVID fatigue, makes me wonder whether we have indeed lost our capacity to wait, or whether we ever really had any such capacity.

 Hearing this parable about the ten bridesmaids, we get a sense that maybe the capacity to wait has never been all that great! Jesus tells the parable to his disciples near the end of his ministry, just days before he will be arrested, crucified, buried, and raised from the dead. He is trying to prepare them for what is to come, for a time when he will not be with them, and he seems to anticipate that it will involve a lot of waiting and wondering, especially about his return.

 “The kingdom of heaven will be like this,” he says. And then he tells them the parable. Jesus has told them parables about the kingdom of heaven before, parables about a lost coin and a lost sheep and a lost son, parables about a wedding banquet and a vineyard and a forgiving king, parables about talents and servants and an absent master. He told them those parables to teach them how precious the kingdom is and how sought after it should be and how seriously they should strive for it. “Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven,” he says. But in this instance the parable about the Kingdom of Heaven is about waiting; the setting is again a wedding banquet.

 Everyone has a wedding story. Ministers have a lot of them: stories of dramatic flower girls and hesitant ringbearers, misspoken lines and fainting groomsmen, dropped rings, and the occasional wardrobe malfunction! Perhaps that is why Jesus sets this parable there, linking the Kingdom of Heaven with a festive celebration which everyone looks forward to with great anticipation and yet, with the distinct possibility that something could go awry. Jesus’ parable is about a wedding banquet and the coming of the bridegroom, but mostly it is about ten bridesmaids and their lamps. In that day it was the task of the bridesmaids to welcome the bride and groom to their home. After the wedding ceremony the newlyweds would tour the town by the longest road possible in order to receive the good wishes of all their neighbors and then arrive at their home for the wedding banquet. Bridesmaids were to greet them with lamps lit as they arrived at dusk or in the dark of night. The bridesmaids knew the bride and groom were coming, they just didn’t know exactly when; it depended upon the route taken and the length of their visits along the way. In this parable the bridegroom is delayed – for what reason we do not know – and so as they wait, the bridesmaids become drowsy and fall asleep. The foolish and the wise alike doze on the doorstep of the house.

As the clock strikes twelve a shout arises, “The bridegroom is coming!” and the bridesmaids awake and light their lamps. But five of the bridesmaids have too little oil left to keep their lamps lit. Those who have enough oil have only enough for themselves; they have none to share. So, the foolish bridesmaids hurry off to search for an all-night lamp oil shop, and while they are away, the groom arrives. The five wise bridesmaids welcome him with lamps lit and enter the house to join the party. By the time the foolish bridesmaids arrive back at the house with their lighted lamps in hand, it is too late. The door is locked and their pleas for the door to be opened are rejected. “The kingdom of heaven is like this,” says Jesus. “Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

All ten bridesmaids got tired of waiting and fell asleep. Yet, despite Jesus’ admonition to “keep awake”, the bridesmaids are not condemned for sleeping. The wise bridesmaids sleep, because they can afford to; they are prepared to welcome the bridegroom and share in the party when he comes. The foolish bridesmaids are condemned for being unprepared. They failed in their one task: lighting their lamps to welcome the bridegroom. They failed because they were unprepared. If they had taken time to prepare in the early evening, to run to the local Lamps-R-Us shop, get the oil, and return before the groom arrived, they would have been ready to welcome him with lamps ablaze. Instead they slept and their lamps went unlit. The wise bridesmaids could afford to sleep; the foolish ones could not, for they were unprepared. They missed the banquet. “The kingdom of heaven is like this,” says Jesus.

 In the Bible study on Monday there was disappointment that the parable was so lacking in signs of grace. Why did the wise bridesmaids not share their oil with the foolish ones or offer their own lamps to them? Why were the foolish bridesmaids shut out of the party upon their return? Having seen the error of their ways and remedied it by buying oil, why were they not allowed in then? The answer, by Jesus’ own words, is that the Kingdom of Heaven is not like that. Grace abounds in many other aspects of Jesus’ ministry and parables, but in this instance – in talking with his disciples about waiting for his return – grace takes a backseat to preparation and the judgment that lack of preparation brings.

 Sometimes good intentions are not enough; you have to do the right thing. The words from the prophet Amos certainly echo that sentiment. The day of the Lord is not a rosy day when all the faithful are rewarded for coming to worship and making offerings of grain and fatted animals and token pledges to placate their God. “I hate those things,” says the LORD. “*Spare me the noise of your songs and half-hearted prayers. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!*” God expects more of us than the trappings of worship, more of us than showing up at the wedding feast unprepared. God expects us to live as God calls us to live, to serve as Jesus showed us how to serve, and while there is grace in recognizing that we cannot fulfill that calling perfectly, there is an expectation that we try.

 Too often the Kingdom of Heaven is regarded as a *place* to which we aspire to go at our deaths, rather than the *reign of God* under which we live day to day. The Kingdom of Heaven, the reign of God, is that reality in which we already live since the time of Jesus’ coming. If we are to participate in it and live under God’s reign rather than fighting against it, then we must begin now to live and serve as God asks while we await Christ’s return in glory. This waiting time is to be an active time, a time in which we are preparing for Christ’s coming so that when he does come, we are found to be doing just what he called us to do! And what he calls us to do is much the same as what Amos said: *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!* It is much the same as what Micah said: *Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.* It is just the same as what Jesus said: *Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself!*

 Jesus wants all his disciples, including you and me, to understand that all that good work begins now – while we are waiting. If you would be ready, then have your oil at hand, your lamp prepared, your light ready to shine. Don’t fall asleep without preparing for the coming of the One who welcomes you to the heavenly banquet. How shall you prepare? By continuing the work of the Messiah:

 By binding up the brokenhearted who live in your neighborhood

or work where you work

or go to school where you go to school,

 By proclaiming liberty and release to those imprisoned by despair and

offering to them hope in a God who loves them,

By comforting those who mourn - comforting them, not with empty

platitudes, but with the love of God and the sure promises of Christ,

By doing justice and bringing to the oppressed tidings of great joy for all

people, tidings of the Savior who is Christ the Lord,

By daring to believe in Jesus Christ and following him as a faithful disciple.

By following the Ten Commandments inscribed on stone and the great commandments upon which they are based, loving God with all that you are and loving your neighbor as yourself.

God demands a lot from us while we wait for Christ’s return and wait for this pandemic to end and wait for a president to be officially declared. We are called to continue the Messiah’s work while we wait. Since you know neither the day nor the hour of his return, or of the pandemic’s end, keep awake,

 keep proclaiming hope,

 keep offering comfort,

 keep bringing tidings of great joy to all people,

keep doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God.

With the committed hands and heart of a disciple, prepare your lamps and let them shine. For the waiting will end! Ten were waiting with lamps in hand, but only five were prepared. Be among the wise! Be prepared! And then, let your light shine! Amen

1. “As days stretch on, we’re forced to practice our least favorite virtue: Patience”, Marc Fisher, *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2020, p.A21 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)