***Lightbearers***

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

The last step toward ordination as a teaching elder is an examination on the floor of presbytery. In Mission Presbytery, where I was ordained a little over a year ago, the examinations team prepares a question based on your specific call and then opens the floor to everyone at the meeting. That morning, after I’d answered their question about the elements of faith formation, an elder approached the microphone and asked, “What is your favorite part of worship to prepare and why?” I thought, okay, that’s an easy one. I love worship. I love the liturgy and the ritual, the very real elements that point to the amazing grace and love of God we feel but cannot see, the corporate joining of our movement, voice, and breath as we join as one in song and prayer.

But then as I ran through the elements of worship, I struggled to pick just one. How can I pick one when they are all part of the same experience? The call to worship leads to our honest confession, the Word leads us to prayer, the songs provide a chance for us all to proclaim our faith in response, and everything leads to our communion with each other and our Lord at the Table. After acknowledging this, I admitted that my favorite piece to prepare was communion. I loved crafting the words of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, inviting the community to the Table together, offering the bread and cup to each person in a moment of intentional connection.

Later, a friend remarked that she was surprised that I didn’t say the children’s message. As the associate pastor for Christian formation, it had been my job to lead the children’s message each Sunday that I was not preaching the sermon for everyone. And it had been through preaching the children’s sermon at my home church that I had discovered my preaching voice and answered a call to pastoral ministry. And I do love the children’s message and, even more so, including children in all aspects of worship, including the Table. But I couldn’t name them all.

If you look at my seminary transcript, my love for Christian formation and liturgical worship becomes clear. So you can imagine why I bristle at today’s text from the prophet Amos. “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.” But Amos! I love them! The singing, the prayers, the words of scripture washing over me.

But then I remember the daily life of my classroom. For seventeen years, I lived in community with groups of children. We had routines and rituals, patterns of living together that we came to expect and cherish, small patterns that if we missed in our hurry to get to the business of the day made us inexplicably cranky. The safekeeper box, the wish well board, the greeting rituals, the line chants, the butterfly wand…each a living experience that transformed us through these small practices and informed how we responded to each other through the rest of the day.

But each class was different. Sometimes I found that a practice that was essential for one group didn’t work for another. Sure, they would walk through the steps to check it off the to-do list, but it didn’t matter really. It was a meaningless thing. I think this is the problem Amos is addressing. God doesn’t delight in us checking off boxes in worship. God craves the connection with us that meaningful, embodied, participatory worship brings. The worship that transforms us so that we can’t help but go out into this imperfect world and break open glimpses of the kingdom, the places where justice and righteousness roll on like an ever-flowing stream, and we get closer to the heavenly banquet where everything is just how God wants it to be for us.

Amos’s listeners had grown complacent. Their patterns of worship had lost their ability to engage and transform. And now they were not ready to go out and act in the ways that bring God’s justice and righteousness into the world that God loves.

Worship is as much an act of formation as it is an act of praise. And when we are formed in faith to be doers of justice, those acts of justice are acts of praise and worship when we tend to the most vulnerable among us. In the gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus remind the disciples of the importance of faith formation that transforms our lives for kingdom living in the midst of this world.

So we move from Amos who rails against empty rituals and meaningless practices to Jesus who reminds the disciples to tend to the oil in the lamps of God’s light with formation practices so that they are always prepared to be doers of justice.

Now this parable can cause anxiety. Immediately we ask, are we the wise ones or the foolish ones? And then we come to the defense of the foolish…why wouldn’t they fall asleep? What is wrong with that? There wasn’t anything else to do, cooped up in the house in the middle of the night. And why are they getting flak for not having an extra flask of oil? They brought what was needed. They were ready to do their job. It wasn’t their fault the groom took so long getting there. And why is the groom so late anyway? Are there no clocks in the kingdom of heaven? And if the others had some oil, why didn’t they share? Isn’t that what Jesus was all about? Twenty verses from here, Jesus will be telling them that when they shared and cared for the least of these, they did it for him and that was to be commended. But here, leave them in the cold and dark of night.

But, for a minute, let’s put aside these first impressions. Remember that all ten were invited. All ten were welcome. All ten had to wait. All ten fell asleep. There was nothing about them that doomed them to failure. It didn’t have to be this way. Maybe this isn’t telling us that we are either wise or foolish, but rather is telling us all how to be wise.

Jesus is talking to the disciples here. After three years of traveling with him, listening to him, healing the sick, and feeding the hungry with him, they ask, in the beginning of chapter 24, “so, Jesus, when is this destruction of the temple going happen? And when will you be coming into all your glory? And when will this season, with all this suffering and confusion, end?”

See, they can’t wait for the day of the Lord. Like Amos’s listeners, they, too, picture a day of sunshine and roses. But Jesus, like Amos before him, tells them that’s not what it’s going to be like. That things are going to get bad, apocalypse bad. And that no one knows when the time is coming to bear their light, but he needs them to be ready all the time.

This is definitely not what the disciples wanted to hear. The disciples thought that the promise of the kingdom, the day when justice would roll on like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, was imminent. In a society struggling under an unequal distribution of wealth, an empire that valued power over people, and unrest among neighbors, they didn’t want to hear about any delay.

This isn’t really a parable about doing something. It’s sandwiched in between a story about acting with integrity and a story about using your talents and being courageous doers. But this one is different. It’s about preparation for the action. It wasn’t the sleeping, the inaction, that got them, even the wise did that. It’s the fact that they didn’t keep tabs on their supply. So they weren’t ready when they were needed most.

See, those foolish bridesmaids had the ability to get the oil. This is not a parable about scarcity either. This is not a parable about haves and have-nots. Even in the middle of the night, this ancient Palestinian town apparently had an all-night lamp oil store where there is plenty. The young women were free to travel around in the dark and they had the money to procure what they needed. So, here, they aren’t the least of these. They’re just not ready.

So our question becomes how do we, as disciples charged with bearing the light in the darkness of night so we can all find our way to the heavenly banquet, stay ready?

I am an overthinker. I arrive ten minutes early to everything just in case something happens on the way. I was the classmate everyone came to when the dry erase markers wouldn’t work. Don’t worry, I had extras in my backpack. You need a bandaid. I got it. At that presbytery meeting I told you about, when the tech asked if anyone had a battery for the presentation clicker, I had some in my bag, of course. But I don’t think that’s the kind of preparation Jesus is talking about. The oil here is not as much physical acts as it is spiritual formation.

See, he needs us to be light bearers for him, carrying a little bit of his light into the world. We have seen this light breaking through in a million tiny places in the world, places where justice is found and dignity is restored, where people are safe and peace reigns, where the beauty of creation awes us, and we know God is with us. Even if it’s fleeting, we’ve seen the pinpoint of light that leads the way. And we are called to carry it.

And actions are very important. Jesus is clear about that. But here, in this parable, Jesus is reminding them of the importance of preparing their hearts and minds and souls for the action so that they don’t burn out when it doesn’t seem to matter how much we do, there’s always more. Or when the ways of living in this world threaten to distract us from the ways of kingdom living, so often in opposition to each other. This is the work of Christian formation, the practice we get in worship and community here, so that we can be ready to burst through those doors like a river of justice into the world.

So how do we stay prepared? We tend to the oil. This struggle to patiently wait for the kingdom isn’t new. But when others may be giving up, we don’t have to because we’ve seen it get really bad for God’s people and God always comes through. That’s the extra oil. It’s faith and hope that comes from a relationship with God.

So where is the all-night lamp oil store? Where do we keep going back to replenish the supply when we grow weary? It’s here, the community of God worshiping and learning together. It’s where we are formed in the Christian faith. We tend to our faith, coming to the table and font, praying to God, listening to each other’s witness of the goodness of God, repeating the stories of God’s faithfulness across time. We find community in the church where we practice living in the kingdom of heaven, where justice and love and peace abound. We are mindful that these rituals and festivals and worship are not empty or vain, but participatory moments where we come face to face with God and are transformed to be light bearers, doers of justice and righteousness. Here, we find the oil of grace, compassion, and love of Christ that is freely given to us and we train our eyes to see those who need that light to find their way in a world that is so often stacked against them.

So my fellow light bearers, let’s keep ready together. And then take what we’ve learned here about God’s grace out into the world to make that world a little more like the kingdom of God one small light, one small act of kindness, one small act of justice, at a time.

Amen.