

*Choosing to be Ready*  
Matthew 25:1-13  
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**When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil  
with them; but the wise took flasks of oil  
with their lamps.**

We humans choose to be ready for all sorts of events and occurrences in our daily routines. In fact, our lives consist of a series of related and unrelated preparations. Very seldom are getting ready for absolutely nothing! Even we retired folk. Less maybe; but usually something. For example, I spent several hours this week putting together some sensible and useful words to share with you today! In fact, we all have some sense of *been there, done that* when Jesus tells this parable about preparing for an important event.

I like to remind people that Jesus used stories—parables and other unusual yarns—to communicate important truths. They may have been loosely based on real observations in his life, but they are simply stories. He was not afraid to employ the tactic of *hyperbole*, or purposely overstating the truth. As my mother said a million times, parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings and cannot always be easily translated into real life. Jesus was sometimes subtle in his point-making...and sometimes not. Some parables can even feel harsh and judgmental in tone. Remember, they are tales meant to enlighten eternal truths; meant in part to help his followers make wise choices.

We have arrived at a point of urgency in Jesus' ministry. Jesus and his disciples had marched into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week. He had spent the last few days unleashing some of his harshest critiques of the then-current world order, including the Roman rulers, the leaders of his community of faith, and the fearful apathy of his followers. He has been using parables, partly to keep his opponents at least a little off-guard, as he rushes to complete his assigned and accepted mission in the world. The Savior knew what he faced in the next few days even if his closest associated remain relatively clueless.

The lectionary immerses us for three weeks in the deep lessons of Matthew 25. The next chapter marks the beginning of the Passion story. Jesus kicks off this final round of teaching with the parable of the ten bridesmaids. This, he says, is what the Kingdom of heaven will be like: A group of wedding attenders getting ready for the feast to commence. A wedding was a regular event in the lives of people in Jesus' day. They tended to be community-wide occurrences, not the rather selective affairs

of today. One of the highlights of the rite was the appearance of the *bridegroom*. I haven't done exhaustive research on this matter, but it seems that his presence was not specifically scheduled, although it did signal the start of the party. Potential participants watched and waited for this moment. When he showed up, you'd better be ready to join the procession. A burning lantern for some reason was a part of the watching ritual. In Jesus' story, five bridesmaids had lit lamps, and five didn't. That resulted in entrance into the feast by some...and exclusion for others. A pretty harsh judgment on these poor folks who were fellow community members.

I would like to suggest that Jesus' emphasis was not on judgment (which is where we often focus), but rather on preparation. As his ministry on earth approached its conclusion, Jesus reminded his actual and potential followers that the ticket to the Kingdom feast was easy to get. It came down to a matter of choice; of being ready. Jesus makes no judgments about the goodness of the lives of the ten bridesmaids. Simply that five made the wise choice to be prepared...and five didn't. And being ready did not amount to a challenging task. You had to have more than enough oil in your lamps. Lamp oil was a readily-available commodity and fairly easy to transport or buy. Five of the group managed to pack the extra amount...and five didn't. The host of the feast denied the unlit five access to the banquet.

Jesus concludes with what sounds like an ominous warning: **Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.**

Some folks today who hold to a particular branch of theology jump to the conclusion that followers of Jesus need to spend the bulk of their energy preparing for the end of the world...or they will be left behind. I (and the PCUSA) do not generally come to the same conclusion. We believe, as we say in our creeds, that Jesus will come again. We also affirm that our focus in discipleship should not be narrowly (or solely) on our entrance into the heavenly feast. Jesus says in another place, *the kingdom of heaven is in/among you*.

While a quick scan of our lives in St. Helens or Portland doesn't often elicit the response, *Ah, the Kingdom of Heaven!* Sometimes, maybe. But if you're a resident of Gaza, the settlements close by, or Ukraine, or downtown Portland (to name just a few places), you're more likely to shout, *This is hell on earth!!* Still, we do not come into the fellowship of Jesus to escape the hatred and violence around us; but rather to invade the instances of hell on earth with our overcoming Kingdom spirit.

This moment does not constitute the first time that the forces of Jesus appear to be on the losing side of history. We started in that position: Jesus "lost" the battle with the religious and political leaders of his day. But Kingdom power infused him in the Resurrection and has been transferred to Christians through the ages—all the way to St Helens today. We are called, not to whimper and whine, but to strap on the helmet of salvation, the Word of Truth, the Sword of the Spirit, and get ready for the

coming of Jesus by choosing to be ready for whatever ways Jesus calls us to serve in our worlds TODAY.

I'll be back in two weeks to address the last part of Chapter 25, in which Jesus lays out some more clear indications of what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like. But for now, I want to leave you with a word of encouragement (not judgment) from Jesus: *Take your flasks of oil with you!* Obviously, this is not a literal command for us. Just like most of the parables, we are required to discern the principle of the story and apply that to our life. Z's interpretation: Choose to be ready *every day* to serve the great ends of the Body of Christ. First choice: Affirm daily the Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior and that you trust that he will guide your everyday living. Second choice: Believe that the Savior can use your gifts and talents to make St. Helens and our world a more heavenly place. Third choice: Turn off the bad news stream and look around for the many opportunities for Kingdom service, sometimes literally on the street on which you live. You never know when the call to service in the name of Jesus will knock on your door or your heart. Choose to be ready to respond.