**Weekend of Sunday, November 12, 2023**

**24th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 32/Year A**

**First Reading: Amos 5:18-24**

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:1-13**

**Sermon Title: *“The Call for Preparedness: Shine Your Light!”***

**Theme**

*Today the prophet Amos calls for justice to roll down like waters. Paul urges us to encourage one another with the promised coming of the Lord. Jesus tells the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Surrounded by the faithful of every time and place, we celebrate Christ’s coming in our midst in the word of life and the feast of victory—the marriage feast of the lamb.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Amos 5:18-24**

*In the days of Amos, people thought that the day of the LORD would be a time of great victory, but Amos announced that it would be a day of darkness, not light. He said liturgy is no substitute for obedience. The LORD demands justice and righteousness in the community.*

 18Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!
  Why do you want the day of the Lord?
 It is darkness, not light;
  19as if someone fled from a lion,
  and was met by a bear;
 or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
  and was bitten by a snake.
 20Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light,
  and gloom with no brightness in it?

 21I hate, I despise your festivals,
  and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
 22Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
  I will not accept them;
 and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
  I will not look upon.
 23Take away from me the noise of your songs;
  I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
 24But let justice roll down like waters,
  and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

*Some of the Thessalonians are worried that dead Christians will be excluded from the resurrection to eternal life when Christ comes again. Paul reassures them with the word of hope that all Christians, living or dead, will be raised into everlasting life with Christ.*

13We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18Therefore encourage one another with these words.

**Gospel: Matthew 25:1-13**

*Jesus tells a parable about his own second coming, emphasizing the need for readiness at all times.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 1“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

**Sermon**

I have entitled this sermon, “The Call for Preparedness: Shine Your Light!” Most of the inspiration for that title comes from Jesus in the Gospel Reading from Matthew.

In Matthew, Jesus shares what some Bibles title “The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.” In another Bible, the same parable is entitled, “The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids.” That gets to the point, doesn’t it?

First of all, it’s a parable, so let’s not get lost in the details. As the story goes, there were ten bridesmaids. All ten have come to the wedding looking their best; all ten have their lamps aglow with expectation; all ten, presumably, have on their bridesmaid gowns. We would never guess from the wedding party photos that half of them are wise and half are foolish.

By the way, did you hear about the woman who was hired last Wednesday to sew ten bridesmaids’ dresses by Saturday?

She seamstressed but got it done.
However, her skills are only sew sew.

Back to the parable. In the parable, Jesus is the bridegroom and we are the bridesmaids. Many of us men in the congregation are thinking, “Finally, I get to be a bridesmaid!” It's not the looks, the lamps, or the long dresses that separate the wise from the foolish – it's preparedness.

Verse 13 in the NRSV has been translated as follows for us:

13“Keep ***awake***, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

“awake” ~ (*gregoreo) ~* “be prepared”

I think the editors and translators have made a mistake here. The Greek verb translated as “awake” is *gregoreo* and it more accurately means to *be prepared.* I will say more about this as we go on.

Jesus doesn’t tell us why the bridegroom in the parable is delayed, but he is. That seems not to be of concern. What does seem to be of concern is the detail that five of the ten bridesmaids are *prepared* for the groom even though he is delayed, but the other five are not. The wise bridesmaids have enough fuel to wait him out and because they are prepared, they will be ready whenever he arrives and the wedding starts. However, the foolish bridesmaids have only enough oil for a bridegroom and a wedding of their convenience.

Now I would like to ask the married women in the congregation a question. Did you have a bridesmaid who thought your wedding day was all about her? I hear of these stories, but I have to say, in all the weddings I’ve performed, I’ve never noticed it.

Preparedness in Matthew’s Gospel is, of course, living in the already but not yet Kingdom of God - living the life described in the Sermon on the Mount, what I call the life of discipleship. You are familiar enough with Jesus’s sermon. Many of us can live the life of discipleship for a short while, but then life gets in the way – real life.

When our bridegroom Jesus is delayed and with it the Kingdom of God in its fullness, that which theologians call the *Parousia*, that is when problems arise.

* Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when hostility breaks out again and again. Where is that bridegroom? Preparedness is needed.
* Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, can be tedious. Where is that bridegroom? Preparedness is needed.

I imagine that if God was looking at the physical presence of the Body of Christ, we all look alike. Using Jesus’s parable of the bridesmaids, we all look marvelous; we all have lamps aglow; all of us are in our poofy dresses; all of us are excited about the wedding. But deep into the night, when the bridegroom arrives, some of us will be attempting in vain to fan a dying flame to life. That is when it will be easier to distinguish wisdom from foolishness.

Back to the parable, five wise bridesmaids are prepared, even for a delay; five foolish bridesmaids are not. Which one do you relate to?

The editors and translators of the NRSV and the author of the Prayer of the Day think the problem is *sleep, the inability to stay awake*. But all ten of them fell asleep – the inability to stay awake is not the problem. The problem is also not having enough oil. After all, all had enough oil and were energetic enough if the bridegroom would have arrived at their convenience.

(PIC) Of course, Jesus is telling a parable, and like all parables, this one is not intended to be advice for bridesmaids at all. Back beginning in chapter 24, Jesus prophesied that the Temple that the disciples were looking at would come tumbling down. They can’t imagine such a thing. The Temple is the biggest, most glorious thing they have ever seen. And so when they are alone with Jesus they ask him, 24:3“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming at the end of the age?”

Jesus’s answer went on for all of chapter 24 up to and including today’s Gospel Reading. Here’s the point:

Jesus indicates that appropriate preparedness for the Parousia, his coming at the end of the age, is the faithful living of one’s life of discipleship, not constant “watching” for the end. Staying awake in fear of missing out is not Matthew’s understanding of responsible discipleship. Five bridesmaids are prepared, while five are not. This parable teaches us the importance of preparedness for the Parousia, his coming at the end of the age, and the completion of the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew’s Jesus opposes the frantic quest for *knowing* when the end is coming, and he portrays the faithful disciples as those who simply faithfully live out their lives of discipleship and are thus prepared for the Parousia whenever it comes.

A story is told that when Martin Luther was asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow, he answered, “I would plant an apple tree today.” It's a lovely anecdote, and it bears within it a kernel of truth about stewardship of God’s creation, the first assignment God gave to human beings. Luther wanted to be caught prepared, doing what a disciple is supposed to be doing.

There is another concept in today’s readings that could easily be overlooked that I find *illuminating*.

(*eis apantesin)* “to meet”

It shows up in verse six of the Gospel Reading. The bridegroom finally shows up and

there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out ***to meet*** him.’ 7Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’

Uh oh! It is at that moment, the moment they have been waiting for all night, that the bridesmaids have separated themselves into the wise and the foolish.

The same word shows up in the Second Reading from First Thessalonians, and that letter also has to do with the Parousia, Jesus’s coming at the end of the age, and the completion of the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

Some of the Thessalonians are worried that dead Christians will be excluded from the Resurrection to eternal life when Christ comes again. Paul reassures them with the word of hope that all Christians, living and dead, will be raised into everlasting life with Christ.

Paul writes very specifically:

16For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them ***to meet*** the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul addresses the believers' questions about the Parousia, Jesus’s coming at the end of the age, and the completion of the fullness of the Kingdom of God. He assures them that those who have died in Christ will rise, and those who are alive will be caught up together with them ***to meet*** the Lord.

Like all ten of the bridesmaids in Jesus’s parable, whose only concern is *to be prepared to meet* the bridegroom when he arrives, to the Thessalonians, Paul writes that whether the faithful are dead or alive their only concern should be the same, *to be prepared to meet* the Lord when he comes. They are to be unconcerned about when it will happen. Their only concern is *to be prepared to meet* the Lord by living out their lives of discipleship as faithfully as they can

The voice we hear in the First Reading from Amos is the LORD who angrily calls for authentic worship, and by authentic worship the LORD means faithfully living out lives of discipleship through acts of love, mercy, and justice. The Israelites seem unconcerned about the integrity of their worship, which says something about the integrity of their faith. They think that if they go through the motions and check the boxes to meet their worship obligations, the LORD should be appeased. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The LORD’s only concern is the devotion of the hearts of his creation. The LORD provided the Tabernacle and the Temple to facilitate their devotion in the ancient of days. In this present day, the same LORD has provided us, Zion Lutheran Church, with this big old beautiful building to facilitate our devotion – this is the spiritual home out of which we are to live out our lives of devotion.

Recently the Membership Ministry completed a campaign to reach our inactive members. Faithful to our call, we attempted to reach them to get them to reengage their lives of discipleship through Zion, their spiritual home. It’s not about butts in the pews or money through offerings, it's about reengaging their lives of discipleship – you just can’t mail that in. How can one be ready to meet the LORD when he arrives if that one is not prepared?

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Putting all these readings together, we have a pretty good manual for the life of discipleship within the kingdom of God here and now.

1) Don’t be overly concerned about the when and where. It is not for us to know. It is enough for us to know that we are to be prepared at all times. How do we do that? I am so glad you asked.

2) From the prophecy of Amos we hear the LORD say that authentic worship; living out our lives of discipleship through acts of love, mercy, and justice are the best ways to be prepared.

And finally, 3) we should hold onto the blessed hope of Christ's return, finding comfort and encouragement in the promise by shining the lights of our hearts to be an encouragement to one another.

These passages call us to be people of action, living out our lives of discipleship through acts of love, mercy, and justice. As we live out our lives of discipleship authentically, let us embrace the hope of Christ's return, and remain vigilant in our preparation. May we shine our spiritual lights brightly in a world that desperately needs the light of Christ as we prepare ourselves for the glorious return of our Savior.

**Prayer**

Merciful God, we get all caught up in the things that don’t matter, to the point that we can’t even distinguish the things that do matter. Help us, we pray, to faithfully live out our lives of discipleship through acts of love, mercy, and justice. And find us prepared to meet you when our Lord Jesus returns. We pray this in his name. Amen