

Be Ready

Are you ready? Our sanctuary here at Fourth Street is ready. Eleanor Kiser and Cindy Rehm finished dressing the church for Christmas this past Wednesday and once again they have done beautiful work. The sanctuary is ready. The department stores are ready. They've been ready since September. Their shelves are stocked, readied for us to buy and empty them. The grocery stores are ready with turkeys, hams, and other items specific to our holiday meals. The flower shops are ready with poinsettias, holly, and Christmas ribbons. City streets are ready with decorations. Radio stations are ready with Christmas music and the talk shows are already inviting arguments about whether or not manger scenes should be allowed on public property and public buildings. But are you ready? Am I ready?

I suspect the answer to that question about us being ready can be addressed on several levels. We could talk about decorating our homes, purchasing and wrapping gifts, preparing for special meals, addressing and sending cards, and which Christmas programs we plan to attend. We could also talk about our mood or state of mind. Are we in the "Christmas Spirit" or are we in the way of Scrooge who let his feelings out with a disgusted "Bah Humbug!" But, as you can already guess, I'm more interested in inquiring about the spiritual dimension. Are you ready in your relationship with God? Is your heart ready? Are you ready to celebrate Christmas? Are you getting ready? What does it really mean to be ready--ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus and ready to receive Him when He comes again? What are you to do to be ready? What am I to do to be ready for that? What does being ready really look like anyway?

In our Scripture lesson this morning we discover ten people who had a responsibility to be ready. Myron Augsburg, in The Communicator's Commentary states: "Jewish marriage had three stages: the engagement, the betrothal, and the marriage. This story is of the third stage where the bridegroom goes to the home of the bride to bring her to his own home in marriage. It is this event that takes place in the parable, and the ten virgins are friends who join the celebration. It was customary for girls to keep the bride company as they waited for the bridegroom, and to dance along the road with their torches in celebration." A note in The NIV Study Bible adds this information: "The bridesmaids, . . . were responsible for preparing the bride to meet the bridegroom."

2

When we put these two pieces of information together, it puts a slant on this story that we might otherwise miss. The ten virgins or ten bridesmaids are helpers and servants to the bride, and if we look elsewhere in Scripture, we find out that the bride is Christ's Church, and that the bridegroom is Christ Himself. In John 14, Jesus tells His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am there you will be also."

Do you see the connection? In the parable, the bridegroom is coming from his own home to the home of the bride to get her and to take to be with him in his home. There will be feasting and celebration at her home, but the goal is to get back with her to his home. The job of the bridesmaids is to announce and to celebrate the bridegroom's arrival and to prepare the bride to go back with him.

Now the problem is, if Jesus is the bridegroom and the Church is His bride, who are the bridesmaids? And where do we fit in? It seems to me that the truth is that we have a dual role. All who know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord are a part of the Church and therefore a part of His bride. Ephesians 5:25-27 say, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy.." True believers--past, present and future--make up the holy bride of Christ. We are the bride of Christ.

But, at the same time, we as individuals and as individual churches are bridesmaids. We are called to watch for the bridegroom's return for His bride, called to celebrate His return, called to warn the whole bride of His coming, called to prepare the bride to be ready to go with the bridegroom when He comes for her. And the question for us this morning is how can we be faithful as servants of the bride? In these days of preparation, how can we be wise and faithful bridesmaids? Let's look at our Scripture lesson for this morning and see what we can find out.

Matthew 25:1 says, "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom." We can tell from the context of this parable that the phrase "At that time," refers to the time when the Lord returns. Matthew 24:42, for instance, says, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."

3

Matthew 25:2-4 tell us that among the ten virgins or among the ten bridesmaids there are two categories. Five of the ten are foolish and five are wise. What distinguishes the wise from the foolish is their supply of oil for their oil lamps. The foolish didn't bring any extra oil, only what was already in their lamps. Apparently, they figured that the bridegroom would come sooner rather than later. The wise went to the extra effort and extra expense to bring extra oil just in case the bridegroom tarried--just in case he came later rather than sooner. They were prepared to keep watch for a very long time if necessary, as long as it might take.

Matthew 25:5 tells us that the bridegroom did tarry. Jesus says, "The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep." It is interesting that in this parable, at least, falling asleep was not the problem. All human beings need sleep and the fact that both the wise and the foolish slept only underscores the fact that they were all human and that they all had to wait a long time. It's no sin to be sleepy and no sin to sleep. (Just don't push that too far while I'm preaching!)

Matthew 25:6 says, "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'" I can't prove it, but I think the designation of midnight is significant. Midnight is a definite appointed time, a time when it is most night, a time--especially in that culture--when everyone, except the night watchmen, slept. This is why the bridesmaids couldn't stay awake; they were not accustomed to being up in the middle of the night. What we find here is that both the foolish and wise bridesmaids were asleep and both groups were startled by the watchman's announcement that the bridegroom was at hand. It is only at this point in the story that we begin to grasp the folly of the foolish bridesmaids.

Matthew 25:7-10 report, "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'" "No," they replied, "there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves." "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut."

Now we may be tempted to be critical of the wise bridesmaids for not sharing some of their extra oil with the foolish ones, but we need to keep in mind that the most important person at this

point in the story is the bridegroom, and the most important thing that the bridesmaids had to do was to escort him to the home of the bride. To run out of oil here would have been dereliction of duty and an insult to the bridegroom. It would also be to fail the bride. Five lamps burning brightly were preferable to ten going out before reaching the house of the bride. Generosity to the foolish is no virtue, when it means failing in one's high calling of serving bridegroom and his bride.

The economy of language in this little parable is amazing. At the end of verse 10 Jesus says, "And the door was shut." When I read that sentence I can hear the sound of the door and feel the impact of it's slam in my chest: "The door was shut!" And, indeed it was shut. Matthew 25:11-13 say, "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

But, what does all of this say to us about being ready for Christmas and ready for the Lord's return? There are several important things for us to take to heart here: First, this is no time to be running on empty. We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit as we wait for the Lord's return. Empty or near empty lamps will not do. With the hectic ness of getting ready to observe the holiday and to make it special for ourselves and for our loved ones, it is easy to get distracted from the main thing. Christmas is not about us and our secular expectations, no matter how romantic. Christmas is about Christ, His incarnation: God coming to us in human flesh. Our most important task is to prepare our hearts through prayer and searching the Scriptures that we might be filled with the Holy Spirit. We are here to be wise bridesmaids helping to prepare all of God's people—the Church—to be remember the Lord's first coming and to be ready to greet Him at His second coming. **This is no time to run out of oil.**

Secondly, We need to be prepared to stay in the game for the long haul. We must not under prepare because we may believe the time is short. I remember watching a NASCAR race a number of years ago when the driver who was leading the race in the next to the last lap of the race got mixed up and thought that the race was over. As a result of his mistake he slowed down and lost a race he could have otherwise easily won. 499 laps of hard racing went for nothing because he forgot lap 500! The history of Christ's Church is strewn with people who quit

their faith race before it was over. Some did so because they thought they knew when the Lord was coming back, and they separated themselves from society in communes to await His return on a certain date. When the date came and went and nothing happened they were embarrassed and brought ridicule upon the cause of Christ. Some quit because they became weary in well doing; trying to do many things in their own strength, and thinking they wouldn't have to keep going for so long, they ran out of oil before their testimony was complete. Some quit because they allowed the allure of worldly things to distract them from the cause of Christ. **Mature believers steady their minds and prepare their spirits for a long race.**

A third thing we learn from this parable of Jesus is that we need to take seriously the warning that although our Lord may be a long time coming, His coming when He comes will be sudden. And, once He comes and shuts the door on this present age, there will be no further chances to be admitted into the kingdom. Those who are not already ready to receive the Lord when He comes will not be admitted to the party. Realizing that they have made a mistake, they will seek salvation with tears but by then it will be too late.

Maybe you remember the story of Jacob and Esau. Esau was out hunting and when he came home he was extremely hungry. Jacob had a pot of venison and lentil stew cooking over his campfire and Esau asked for some to satisfy his hunger. Jacob said "you may as much as you want, but only if you sell me your birthright." Esau reasoned "what good is my birthright if I starve," and agreed to give it up. Hebrews 12:16-17 say, "See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears. **This is no time to procrastinate. Today is the day of salvation. Tomorrow it may be too late.**

During these days of Advent, let us prepare for the Lord's coming. Let us receive His salvation now. Let us prepare our hearts for a lifetime of service. Let us pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit that we may never allow our lamps to go out for lack of oil.

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Sermon for December 7, 2008

Be Ready
Matthew 24:42-44; 25:1-13

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