

“Dwindling Oil, Renewing Hope”
November 15, 2020

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

The parables of Jesus come with no set interpretation.

The parables of Jesus do not readily tell us what to think or how to act.

The parables instead invite us to enter them, to walk about, to look around and listen to what is said, and in this way to consider our lives and our world in anew in light of what we discover in these stories.

Each time we hear a parable, it confronts us with new challenges and new possibilities.

What we discover depends in part on where we find ourselves in the parable. And, of course, we usually want to see ourselves alongside those who do the right thing.

So when we hear the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, we want to be among the wise. We're no fools. We don't want to be caught off guard. We want to make sure we're prepared, that we have all the supplies needed, that our lamps are trimmed and burning.

But as we look at our lives in these days, could any of us be faulted for feeling more like those who are running low on oil?

Today is November 15. Eight months ago, we cancelled the worship service for March 15, not knowing how soon we would be back in this space. We've adapted and adjusted.

Lots of people are joining us for worship online each week—as you are now. In some ways this has been good, as many new people have found these worship services on the internet since March. Members are looking out for one another. Because of your generous giving we are also able to look out for the hungry and homeless and vulnerable in our community.

We're holding up as a congregation—but we miss one another and we grow weary and we fear the oil is dwindling.

The pandemic rages around us in ways that have become more troubling in recent weeks. Hospitals are worried about running out of beds and even more about running out of health care providers who can keep up with the increasing caseload. A headline this past week read: “Midwest faces a ‘catastrophic’ lack of hospital beds as number of coronavirus cases surges.” One sign of just how bad it is getting in our state can be seen in our governor finally issuing some guidance about masks and gathering. And yet the federal government seems to have given up on addressing this pandemic in any way.

We grow weary and we fear the oil is dwindling.

The post-election crisis continues and our fragile democracy is threatened by what Michael Gerson last week called “a massive failure of character — a nationwide blackout of integrity —

among elected Republicans.” He said this is “the culmination of Trump’s influence among Republicans, and among White evangelical Christians in particular.”

Gerson, himself a White evangelical Christian, who was a speechwriter for George W. Bush, added: “Now we know what a president without character looks like in the midst of a governing crisis.”

We grow weary and we fear the oil is dwindling.

In our individual and family lives we are feeling the strain and stress of all of this. Jobs lost. Children learning at home then going to school and now once more learning at home. Illness. Financial concerns. And the ongoing precautions that we take to avoid getting or transmitting the coronavirus.

We feel more realistic than foolish as we join with those five bridesmaids and cry: “Our lamps are going out!”

If we are to find the oil that we need—and we can find it;

If we are to let our lights shine once more—and shine they will;

If we are to get through these difficult days—and we will get through them

It will happen as we open ourselves to the renewal that faith offers.

I read recently that Alexis de Tocqueville thought faith exerted a crucial moderating force in a democracy. He argued that though “the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.”

Which brings us to those words of Amos that we heard this morning.

Now, Amos was a prophet. And throughout the small book that bears his name, God rages through the prophet against the violence and the corruption, against the excesses of the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

But again, Amos was not a scold, he was a prophet. His work was not to chastise or criticize, but to call the people to turn in a new direction, to change their minds and their hearts and their actions, to do something different, to be better people.

The religious word for this is “repentance.”

The Book of Amos is a call to repentance and an offer of new life.

This life comes to us as we live in relation to others. We might not be able to get along with everyone. But we can seek right relationship with our neighbors; we can work to establish social structures that help support strong, independent lives rather than make more broken people. We can be a moderating force that brings justice to our land once more.

And so we come back around to that parable of Jesus some 750 or 800 years after Amos.

Jesus is in Jerusalem. He is speaking to his followers who, in a matter of days, will give up and desert him when he is arrested and taken off to be crucified.

And Jesus is speaking to us.

This is the message that comes to us today: Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. Do not give in. Do not give up.

At the Bible study last Wednesday, we were looking at a chapter in Mark that, much like the 25th chapter of Matthew tells of the end of the age and the breaking in of the realm of God.

And in their wisdom, two members helped us look at parables such as the one we have entered this morning in a new way.

This story does not tell us about the future. “You don’t know,” Jesus says. I hear that and my spirit is flooded with relief. Yes, he’s right that we don’t know the day or the hour when the realm of heaven will come breaking into our lives.

Nor does this story leave us stuck in the past or lamenting over past failures.

It invites us to live in the present—and to live fully in the present. With all of his talk about the realm of heaven, Jesus is pointing toward the great value of this earth and of our life.

In this way, the parable of the wise and the foolish, the parable for those low on oil, becomes a parable of hope. You see, hope is that vision for the future that allows us to act in the present. Hope invites us to look beyond failure, beyond despair, beyond fear and death to what might be—and in this present time to start moving toward what we see.

Hope invites us to renewal gives us the oil we need. There is an empowering and forgiving love that will sustain us through all the discouragement and opposition and failure of these days.

While it may feel like it at times, especially at times like these, we are not at the end. What you are doing—and all that you are doing to keep going—matters.

What God is doing through you and through this congregation, what God is doing in our lives is neither easily apprehended nor easily described.

But it is essential to the well-being of our nation and our world.

In faith we believe certain things about our lives and this universe: that God is present in the depths of human suffering; that God is made known to us in weakness, anguish, and despair. And so we have a confident faith—or a doubting, struggling faith—that God is making something new even in the midst of everything that would tempt us to give up.

In this way God calls us to a hope that can see beyond the shadows and the resistance that we sometimes encounter. Because we can see by hope resurrection beyond death, we can dare through that hope to act for the good even when confronted by all that disheartens and discourages.

Keeping awake is how Jesus put it. Those who are wise will look ahead, see what is coming and be ready.

Keep awake.

Live in the hope that will renew you and renew our world.