"Tend Your Light"
November 8, 2026

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

"Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it."

That was Thomas Paine, writing in December of 1776. For those who have been worried about tyranny overtaking this nation, those words could have been written 250 years later. In the face of one common danger, the people came forth.

If there is a new energy that many are feeling today, it grew out of a weariness with the old debilitating ways:

We were tired of the lies.

We were tired of the racism.

We were tired of the violent attacks on undocumented immigrants and United States citizens alike.

We were tired of turning our nation's back to desperate refugees.

We were tired of ignoring the growing threat of climate change.

We were tired of the war and the corruption and the privileging of billionaires.

We were tired of the mean-spiritedness, the cruelty that seemed to be the point, the lack of basic human decency.

Those of us in the church were tired of the ways in which the word "Christian" had been linked with the lies, the racism, the attacks, the ignorance, the denial, the war, the excess, the lack of decency. Scandal and hypocrisy and outright hatred seemed to define much of what is labeled as "Christian" while those who have tried to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God were derided as fools and pushed toward obscurity.

Out of weariness, people voted. In absolute numbers, a record number of people voted nationwide. That was the case here in Iowa as well, with a record-breaking 1,380,000 residents casting their ballots. Regardless of party affiliation, all of us can be glad about this. As UI professor of Political Science and Congregational UCC member, Caroline Tolbert has said, it is good for democracy when people vote. This past week, it was very good indeed.

After the election, South Carolina Representative, James Clyburn quoted de Tocqueville, who said, "America's greatness is not that she is more enlightened than any other nation, but rather because she has always been able to correct her faults." Clyburn added: "That's what we did on Tuesday. We repaired a big fault that had opened in our body politic."

Many have felt—and, I think, rightly so—many have felt that our democracy has been greatly threatened in recent years. We have worried about corruption and a growing authoritarianism. This danger did not vanish with the sunrise on Wednesday. In fact, the appointment of a new chief of staff on Friday suggested the administration was doubling down on the policies and procedures the people now rejected. Still, the great number of people who voted in this election is a sign of hope for democracy, for this nation, and for its people.

Of course, we need to recognize that this election—and any election in and of itself—is neither the end of the world nor the coming of God's realm. As important as it was that you voted, what we do *after* elections to live out our faith and our commitments is as important as what we do *at* elections.

Nothing that we have sought as individuals, nothing that we have worked for as a congregation will now suddenly appear in all fulness as the result of a new Congress in Washington or a new Governor in Des Moines.

This morning, then, we need to turn our thoughts to the tasks to which we are called in the days—and years—ahead.

Which brings us to those words of Amos.

The prophet Amos spoke the Word of God to a nation in which the rich were very well-off. The power of the military was obvious and well-known. The cities were elegant; the second homes were extravagant.

At the same time, there was an underside to all of this—there always is. There seems to have been a widespread addiction problem. Violence was evident. Commerce was corrupt and fraudulent. The poor were denied justice.

Now, Amos was a prophet—not someone who tells the future, but someone who tells forth the word of God. And through this prophet, God rages against the violence and the corruption in the nation, against the excesses of the wealthy at the expense of the poor, and against empty acts of religious piety.

But again, Amos was not a scold, he was a prophet. His work was not to chastise or criticize. His task was 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." Repentance results in, as de Tocqueville suggested, the ability to correct our faults.

Above all else, the Book of Amos is a call to repentance and an offer of new life.

And Amos is clear that new 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 relationships with our neighbors. We can seek basic human decency in our actions. 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.

The justice for which Amos calls is not an end in itself. We seek justice because it is what God

desires. We seek right relationships to be ready on the day of God.

And so, we come 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.

Through Matthew's Gospel, he is also speaking to early Christians who, having heard the good news of the resurrection, are seeking to be faithful followers even as ostracism by their community and persecution by the occupying Roman government are pressing them to give up and return to their previous lives.

And Jesus is speaking to us about the day of God, the realm of heaven, which is always close at hand, calling us to be awake.

Remember: when Jesus talks about the realm of heaven, his is not talking primarily about what will happen to us after we die. He is not so much concerned with our "going" to heaven, as with the God's realm "coming" to earth. This is what he taught his followers to pray for and, indeed, this is what we pray for each time we gather in this place. With all of his talk about the realm of heaven, Jesus is pointing toward the great value of *this* earth and of *this* life.

Because we look in faith toward that time when God's will *is* done on this earth as it is in heaven, our lives and what we do with them, how we live in the years we have are of great and lasting significance.

This life, then, is a time of expectation, a time to be prepared.

Jesus tells a story that takes place around a wedding.

If we will listen with fresh ears, we can sense that the realm of God is a place of unbounded joy, of dancing and celebrating. Those who have lighted torches are ready to respond at any time to God's glorious invitation to be a part of this banquet—a feast spread out for family and friends.

It has been suggested that this parable invites us to take the reality of God seriously once more. Listen for the music of the approaching party; if you haven't heard it clearly enough, await the good news of God's forgiving love with torches lit; and do this all with an eye on the future, not just the present.

"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. What God is doing in our world and in our lives is neither easily apprehended nor easily described.

We do not know the day or the hour when God will break into our lives, our congregation, our world. It happens when we least expect it. Live, then, in ways that bring justice and joy into the world.

This, then, is the message that comes to us today: Do not give in. Do not give up. There is still work that needs to be done and there will *always* be work that needs to be done. We are not creating a utopia in which all problems will cease. We are living as faithful and flawed people in this world.

Following the advice of the spiritual, we keep our lamps trimmed and burning.

There is a powerful and forgiving love that will sustain you through all the discouragement and opposition and failure as you act in the world. So, continue with the good and valuable work that you are doing. What you are doing here 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.

We need to continue to do the work that we God has begun in and through us, recognizing that is still unfinished. Let us continue:

> working for interfaith understanding, cooperation, and acceptance,
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> including people of all sexual orientations in the life of our nation as we do in the life of our congregation,
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> striving to overcome the racism that clings so closely,
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> speaking the truth about the reality of climate change before it's too late,
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> pursuing paths of economic justice,
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> living toward peace,
>
> and—I'll keep saying this until it happens: seeking the good in all things.

And this is what I ask you to do in the days ahead.

Think about—think prayerfully about—those issues, those situations, those people that are important to you. It might be gun violence or education. It might be famine or climate change. It might be refugees on the border or immigrants in Iowa City. It might be the creation of beauty or the bringing of joy. It might something else entirely.

Choose one. And pursue that in the coming year. Learn more. Do more.

Tend your light.

Take care of that precious light that is in your charge. Keep it shining.

Your light is vital in these days.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.