

“Keeping Watch Together”
December 3, 2023

Romans 13:11-13a
Matthew 25:1-13

This morning’s Gospel lesson speaks to those who wait for the coming of Christ—which we do in Advent and which, really, we do in all our days.

And if there were one biblical text that we need to hear in these early December days, I am convinced that this is it.

This parable has long been associated with Advent. It has been the inspiration for several hymns, such as the one we sang this morning. This, of course, is not a *Christmas* story. It comes near the end of Matthew’s Gospel. The adult Jesus is in Jerusalem. He speaks 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, Jesus also speaks 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 speaks to us.

This is the message that comes to us today: Keep awake. Or, as our choir exhorted us, keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

Do not give in. Do not give up.

This is a parable about the realm of heaven—which comes slowly, which calls us to discernment if we are to see it. And you know that 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 he is with the realm of heaven “coming” to earth. This is what Jesus taught his followers to pray for and, indeed, this is what we pray for each time we gather in this place.

By talking about the realm of heaven, Jesus is pointing toward the great value of this earth and of our life *before* we die.

We look in faith toward that time when God’s will is done on this earth as it is in heaven. This means that our lives and what we do with them, how we live in the years we have—are of great and lasting significance. As the Anglican bishop and biblical scholar, N.T. Wright, famously put it: “What is done to the glory of God in the present is genuinely building for God’s future. Acts of justice and mercy, the creation of beauty and the celebration of truth, deeds of love and the creation of communities of kindness and forgiveness—these all matter, and they matter forever.”

And somewhere in your heart, you knew this before you came here today. You came here this morning because you want to do those things that matter. You came because you sense your ability and want to use it. You came here because you wanted to hear again the good news that

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.

One of the realities of the pandemic was what has been called the “great resignation.” People were discouraged and they stopped. They gave up and resigned. Along with other professionals, clergy quit in great numbers. And lots of people just stopped being involved in the work and worship of congregations.

But this is the encouraging and good news that we hear this morning: Do not give up. Do not quit the good and valuable work that you are doing—and what we are doing is of value in God’s now and in God’s eternity.

The realm of heaven arrives as God works in us and through us and among us as a community.

And yet, even as God’s realm comes, in the meantime—in *our* time—we don’t know. We don’t know the day or the hour. We don’t know the wise from the foolish. What God is doing in our world and in our lives is neither easily apprehended nor easily described.

“You don’t know,” Jesus says. I hear that and my spirit is flooded with relief. Yes, he’s right—we don’t know the day or the hour when the realm of heaven will come breaking into our lives. But there is so much more that we don’t know. The prophets reminded us that God’s ways are not our ways. We don’t know.

So, life becomes a time of expectation, a time of keeping awake and alert to what is going on around us and among us.

Certainly, life in our congregation is changing. When the Church Council met last week, I told them I’m not using words like “difficult” and “challenging” nearly as much as I have in the past 3 ½ years. Instead, I’m using “exciting,” “new,” and “energizing” when talking about our life together. A new spirit has come upon us. We are looking forward, trying new things, and finding energy for the tasks ahead.

And while I also usually don’t say things such as this, I have also expressed my sense that this is nothing less than the Spirit of God creating something new in us and among us and through us. I’m not ready to say just what that new thing is. I keep looking for it and seeking to understand it. But I don’t know.

Our theme for Advent this year is “Keeping Watch Together.” It reminds us that discovering the new things that God is doing is a group activity. No one of us sees it all. We need each other.

The wisdom that we need in these days is the wisdom all of us might gain when we are awake and our eyes are open to the future, when we think beyond the immediate present. This is indeed *countercultural*—for much of our culture tells us to keep our eyes closed—or at best, look to the past.

When we focus on present problems instead of defining and moving toward future possibilities, we are like those who show up at a wedding with no oil for the lamps. The light grows dim. The joy of life diminishes.

So, we follow the advice of the spiritual. We keep our lamps trimmed and burning.

After all, we await a great joy. A banquet was the most typical image Jesus used to picture full communion with God. And a wedding was the most obvious occasion for a banquet.

So, Jesus tells a story that takes place around a wedding.

The realm of God, if we look at it with fresh eyes, is a place of unbounded joy, of dancing and celebrating. Those who have oil in their lamps are ready to respond at any time to God's glorious invitation to be a part of this banquet—a big feast spread out for family and friends.

One writer suggests 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.

Listen, too, as Paul reminds us: salvation is near and calls for a new way of living among people. This is really an old way—the way of the prophets called the people of ancient Israel to follow, the way of justice, peace, compassion, and kindness. The good intentions of God for fullness of life are the same throughout scripture. God's purposes remain the same for us today.

Can you see this? The hope of Advent is far more than the hope for the birth of a child in Bethlehem. The hope of Advent is transformation—the hope that God's purposes will be known to all people. They are not now. That is obvious. We wait for a new day.

We are given no timetable for this: about that day and hour no one knows.

Which, of course, is the truth of our individual lives—no telling when our lives will take unexpected turns; there is no telling when hoped for changes will occur; there is no telling when our days will end. We live with that awareness.

And this is the truth of our congregational life—there is no telling when Christ will slip in among us:

judging us with a searing judgment that will allow us to be just;

providing us with a peace beyond all understanding that will help us in doing the necessary and risky work of peacemaking;

loving us with a deep love that enables us to live lives of compassion;

forgiving us in such a way that kindness rules in our own hearts

This is the truth of our world as well—that justice and peace come when we least expect them.

No one knows the day or the hour.

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. So live in ways that bring justice and joy into the world.

Keep awake. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

God has not given up on this congregation, this nation, this world. And let me make it even more

specific: God has not given up on you. That is good news.

In these days then—and it all of our days—let us keep watch together that we might discover the new thing God is doing even now.