

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25  
Psalm 78:1-7  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Matthew 25:1-13

Ah, the wise and foolish virgins. This is a peculiar parable. Indeed, only Matthew, of all of the Gospel writers, chooses to tell it. Matthew places this parable in a set of parables, told just a few days before Jesus' death. They are stories of readiness, and judgment. In one, a slave does not expect his master will return, and is caught out, partying instead of working, when the master returns. In another, two servants invest and steward the talents they are given, while another servant, out of fear, does nothing.

The story starts off cheerfully enough, with a group of 10 teenage girls, all dressed up and ready to participate in a wedding. Imagine how excited they must have been, to be asked to be part of the wedding party. To be given the job of lighting the path for the bridegroom to go to his bride. They had RSVP'd, like the polite young women they are. They checked "chicken or beef." They put on their finest clothes, tucked some lipstick in their handbag, packed a lamp filled with oil. They're all set.

Imagine this group of girls. They are eager. They are filled with expectation — thinking not only of the bridegroom, not only of the bride, but also of their own weddings, of their own futures. They are full of hope.

So they wait. But strangely, the bridegroom does not appear. Even more strangely, he sends no messenger, not to his guests, not even to the members of the wedding party. No word, no bridegroom. Hours pass, as the girls wait, and darkness falls. They're tired, hungry, bored, confused, maybe even a little angry.

They do what anyone would do, if they were left to sit outside in the dark — they light their lamps.

Now, we've all seen a scene, on television or in a movie, when the bride or groom is missing. Maybe you've even been to a wedding where that happened. In those scenes, someone is usually sent in to offer an explanation — to placate the guests and to nudge the organist to extend the *prélude* music, while the bride is calmed down or the groom is sobered up. These scenes are usually played for comic effect. But there is no comedy here, and no messenger: only confusion, and silence.

It's important to remember, here, the context of the community which first heard Matthew's Gospel. It's described in our Epistle today. Jesus had promised his followers eternal life! He had promised he would return, and soon. But members of the church community had begun to die, and Christ had not returned. They were waiting, confused. Their hope was being tested. It felt like God had gone silent. They wondered how long they would be waiting for Christ's kingdom to come.

Back in our parable, the wait extends. Their girls are cold and tired. Even their love of weddings cannot keep them going any longer. Their lamps gutter, and go out. They curl up under their cloaks and fall asleep.

Finally word arrives that the bridegroom is on his way. The girls scramble to get ready, to straighten their dresses and fix their hair. To re-light their lamps. Now comes the moment of truth in this parable: we discover which of these young people are foolish, and which are wise.

Now, if this parable is familiar to you, it is easy to pass over the word “wise,” but it's important here. This is not the wisdom of *sophia*, that we associate with the Holy Spirit and with God. It's not gentle, or generous. It's actually the word *phronimos*, which means “shrewd” or “clever.” It describes a person who makes sure their needs are met. A person who gets what they need. What we have here are clever girls. And clever girls came prepared.

Prepared. How many of you know a Boy Scout? Boy Scouts hold up their fingers and promise to “Be Prepared.” I dated a Boy Scout once — a British one — for whom it was very important to be prepared. He was so prepared that, when we visited Windsor Castle, it took him three trips through the metal detectors before all of the gadgets and equipment he was carrying with him had been removed.

Some of these girls were wise enough prepared -- prepared for the wedding, prepared to wait, prepared for the long haul. But they were not so prepared that they had enough to share.

This parable calls the *other* girls foolish. They're generally mocked for not bringing enough oil, and that's a problem. But it's also pretty foolish for five defenseless young women to go haring off into the dark, hoping to buy oil from shops everyone knows perfectly well aren't open. There's no 24-hour Target in first-century Palestine, after all. After their fruitless errand, they return empty-handed, and are turned away. They waited all that time — for nothing.

This parable lays out a difficult world. All the characters make hard and confusing choices: a rude, inhospitable host shows up late to his own party, then turns away members of his own family. Young girls take bad advice and go

wandering about in the dark; others feel unable to share what they have, for fear they won't be able to do their duty. The stakes seem high: There must be light for the journey. And this light must be sustained, it seems, even if some are lost.

But what if the "foolish" girls had *NOT* gone off, in search of oil? What if they had not abandoned the wedding party, left the feast? What if they all had trusted that the oil the clever girls had brought would be enough?

We, too, are waiting. Waiting for word that our hopes will be fulfilled, waiting to see whether our resources will be enough. What do we do, as we wait in this difficult world? How do we respond to neighbors who are hungry, to news of another mass shooting, to people who have lost everything in a fire or flood? What do we do in the face of a shut door?

The end of this chapter of Matthew gives some direction. It contains one of the New Testament's accounts of the last judgment, when the Lord divides between the "sheep" and the "goats." The Lord says,

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me ...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

We can be wise in our waiting. "Keep alert," our reading says, at the end. Being prepared is an ongoing task. There is work for the kingdom to do: neighbors to feed and clothe, welcome and comfort. There is light to share.

Matthew chose to tell this story of Jesus just before his death, and to a people who were experiencing the confusion and grief of death in their own lives. This parable, therefore, is closely tied to the Resurrection, and our hope beyond the grave. The door, closed in the parable, need not be shut forever. The door to the tomb, after all, will be rolled away. Resurrection is coming.

It's true that we are waiting, still, for the word of the bridegroom, for the fullness and joy of God's kingdom. It's true that we wait in a difficult world, a world that demands all our resources, all the preparedness we can muster, all the love and the patience and hope that we have to give. But we have work to do while we wait, work sharing the Light. We must persist, dig deep, and trust. Trust that the door will open, trust that the bridegroom is coming, and trust that the light, shared among us, will be enough.