

11.12.23

Be Prepared Matthew 25.1-13**Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Do you ever find yourself feeling scared, fearful, or anxious? Do you ever have anxiety dreams? Anxiety dreams are common, many people have them from time to time about something going on in their personal life, at school, work, or in the world. These types of dreams tend to relate to our personal fears and apprehensions. There's an anxiety dream that's common to pastors. In the dream it's time for worship and you're supposed to be preaching but you're not ready, the sermon isn't done, or you can't find it. Sometimes there's an element of surprise that you're **supposed to be prepared** so soon, it's not Sunday already is it? Or you haven't finished **getting ready**, or you overslept, or you're struggling to get to the church, and it seems like you're slogging your way through wet cement, and you just can't get to where you're supposed to be before the service starts. Or everyone is looking at you with hope and expectation and you're just standing there looking at the congregation unsure of what to say or physically unable to speak. When pastors have anxiety dreams like these, they usually wake up in a cold sweat and determine to work on the sermon before the sun comes up so that the dream never becomes reality. I didn't have one of those dreams this week, but I was reminded of them by today's parable.

Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is like an anxiety dream for followers of Jesus about his return. The parable is a strong reminder of **the importance of readiness, of being prepared at all times** for the Second Coming of Jesus.

Listen to Matthew 25:1-13.

"Then **the kingdom of heaven will be like this**. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was **delayed, all of them** became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, '*Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.*' ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, '*Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.*' ⁹ But the wise replied, '*No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers*

*and buy some for yourselves.’*¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, **and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.**¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, *‘Lord, lord, open to us.’*¹² But he replied, *‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’*¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

In this parable Jesus compares waiting for a groom to waiting for his return. The parable is a lesson about the value of preparedness over planning when it comes to the future. The wise bridesmaids get to go to the wedding banquet because they’re prepared. They **have** the needed oil. The others had a plan, *“Let’s go buy some oil.”* They missed the party.

The biblical approach to the future involves **prayer and preparation, more than prediction and planning**. This is true whether we are talking about our personal life, the church, or the Second Coming of Jesus. If you go to Coast Guard Beach when the wind is up, you see surfers catching the waves at any time of the year. Folks who love to surf basically do everything else in life that they have to do, just so they can get back to the water. Surfers don’t *plan* waves; they *prepare* to ride them when they roll in.

In a similar way, we don’t plan the future, much of what happens to us is beyond our control, what we can do is prepare to deal with it when it rolls in. Personally, we don’t plan much of what happens to us or to members of our family. An illness, an accident, a death, a crisis – we don’t plan these. They happen. At a larger level, much of what impacts Brewster Baptist Church happens outside of the church and is outside of our control. The cost of housing on the Cape, the increasing number of seasonal homes and the declining number of families with children, the lack of year-round, full-time jobs that pay a sustainable wage or provide health care – these are examples of issues beyond our control that greatly impact the communities in which we live and the people we serve. At a national level, things that happen in other states and regions of the country impact our lives here on the Cape. One example is the quality of the air we breathe is directly impacted by power plants and factories located in states to our west or wildfires that happen in Canada. Events happening at an international or global level such as the wars in Ukraine and the middle east also impact our lives even though they’re beyond our planning, prediction, and control.

Typical approaches to the future used to involve prediction and planning. However, the rate of change isn't as slow or incremental as it once was and with the massive changes occurring in the world including the rapid growth of Artificial Intelligence, prayer and preparation are going to be more effective than prediction and planning. Think about the surfers again. They wax their boards, monitor the weather, and get up early – they do everything in their power to be prepared to ride the waves, but the wind and the waves are out of their control.

Throughout the Bible we see God's desire for people to pray and prepare for the Lord's intervention. The Bible doesn't say much positively about people making plans and then offering them to God for a divine blessing. **Proverbs 16:9** says, "*The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.*" **Proverbs 19:21** teaches, "*The human mind may devise many plans, **but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.***" This is a crucially important truth to understand. That verse says I probably should spend more time seeking to discern the purpose of the Lord for my life and for our congregation, than I should be devising plans about what God wants me to do or BBC to do. In our lives we want to do everything we can to discover God's purpose for our lives. We want to be praying and preparing for God's intervention and action so we're ready to ride the wave of what God is doing in the world and in our life.

In Genesis 12 God told Abram to begin a journey and *didn't even tell him where he was going*. Abram couldn't plan the itinerary, all he could do was prepare by telling his family, wrapping up business details, packing his tent and setting out. The Exodus from Egypt is a story of prayer and preparation. God planned the Exodus, no person could. No one would have written the story God did and Moses didn't get to see the whole plan ahead of time. The Israelites prepared by marking their doors, taking everything they could carry, eating fast food, and waiting for the word to move out. John the Baptist preached saying, "**Prepare the way of the Lord.**" He didn't say, "*Plan the way of the Lord.*"

The biblical truth is this: **God does the planning; we do the preparing.** God is the one who says (**Jeremiah 29:11-13**), "*For surely I know **the plans I have for you,** says the Lord, **plans** for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. **Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you***

search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.” Notice God doesn’t say; *“Let me know when you come up with plans for your future that you want me to bless.”*

Preparing involves calling on the Lord, coming to God in relationship, praying, searching, and seeking the Lord with all our heart. Our faith is not one more item on a “to do” list. Our faith forms our “to be and to do” list. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus instructs people about living and growing in relationship with God. Jesus stresses that being spiritually alive means not just knowing religious information, or even saying we believe certain doctrines, but **doing** what Jesus teaches regarding love for God and neighbor.

Right at the beginning of today’s parable Jesus tells us that five of the bridesmaids were foolish and five were wise. We can’t tell that just by looking at them. All ten have come for the wedding; all ten have their lamps lit in expectation, all ten, presumably have on bridesmaids gowns. We’d never guess initially from appearances that half are foolish, and half are wise. It’s not the looks, the lamps, or the long dresses that sets the wise apart from the foolish – **it’s the readiness**. Five of the bridesmaids are ready if the groom is delayed and five are not. The wise have enough oil for the wedding to start whenever the groom arrives; the foolish only have enough for their own timetable. Five are prepared and ready, even for a delay; five are not.

Readiness in Matthew’s Gospel is about living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this briefly or in spurts; but when the kingdom is delayed, when it takes longer for things to happen than we’d like or hope; that’s when problems can arise. Being a peacemaker for a day or two is not as demanding as being a peacemaker when hostility or conflict breaks out between individuals or groups year after year. Praying for those who persecute us and make life difficult and challenging for us – maybe we can do that once or twice but praying for them diligently for an extended period of time, that’s hard. Being merciful for a day or two is one thing, being merciful to others all the time, when the groom is delayed, requires preparation. Over time, life will test and reveal who among Jesus’ followers is prepared and ready, and who is not.

The bridesmaids who get shut out of the wedding banquet represent irresponsible disciples who weren't prepared for God's intervention. They weren't ready for what Amos calls the Day of the Lord. Their problem is not that they were sleeping; the wise bridesmaids also were asleep. Being watchful means being ready at all times, whether we're awake or sleeping. When we trust in God we can sleep in peace and not in fear. **Psalm 17:3, 15** is a prayer inviting God to examine the writer's heart and life, ***"If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness."*** I wonder if verses like that inspired this parable.

It wasn't that difficult to have a lamp ready all the time. It's perhaps slightly more difficult than having your cell phone battery charged up. Neither would be considered a great burden or some impossible task. This shows us that even the simple things God gives us to do, some people don't do them. Many don't reach even the most basic standard of readiness. You may wonder **why didn't the wise bridesmaids share their oil with the foolish bridesmaids?** Remember this is a parable, it's not about physical lamp oil, the oil represents a transforming personal relationship with Christ. It wasn't that the wise virgins were selfish; it's just that you can't borrow someone else's relationship with Christ. Every person is accountable to make their own life right before God. A person cannot borrow another person's faith or character.

The wise bridesmaids were captivated by **a vision** of the importance of the bridegroom's visit. Their **values** are demonstrated in what they do, they not only bring their lamps; they bring flasks of oil as well. **Values are demonstrated by behavior.** Someone said in a way that Matthew would have liked, ***"What you do is what you believe; everything else is just religious talk."*** The wise bridesmaids value the invitation, return, and approval of the bridegroom so much they adjust their behavior accordingly to be ready. In Matthew's terms they are women who have pure hearts, who cultivate love, goodness, mercy, and service. They're righteous women of faith. In the parable, faithful waiting involves being prepared and ready, not planning and prediction. Matthew is making the point that disciples of Jesus are to be concerned with being ready when he returns, not predicting or planning when that might be.

For Matthew, readiness means living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and throughout his gospel. Being ready involves the performance of good works (7:21-27), abstinence from immoral behavior (15:19), love for enemies (5:44), love for other Christians (24:12), the forgiveness of others (18:21-35), unhesitating faith (21:21), loyalty to Jesus (10:32), and love for God and neighbors (22:37). This is God's plan for your life which when followed leads to the love, joy, peace, and hope which so many people are seeking.

In the coming weeks with the holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas many of us will have guests or be guests. Whenever we have guests over, most of us want to be prepared and ready. How would you respond if your relatives and friends just showed up without letting you know they were coming? We want to be prepared for guests whether family, or special friends because frankly we don't want to be embarrassed.

When you have people over do you pick up, clean, dust, and vacuum because you're concerned about what people will think about your physical living space and how you think that reflects on you? I'm not saying we shouldn't do that; part of hospitality is creating a nice space for people in our lives and in our living space. **What would it look like if we cleaned up our lives because Jesus was coming, with the same urgency that we clean our home because some friends or relatives were visiting?**

Matthew might say that at the beginning of the journey of faith, you can't really tell the followers of Jesus apart. They all have lamps; they're all excited about the wedding banquet, they all know how to sing, "Lord, Lord." The longer the journey of faith lasts, the later at night it gets, the clearer it becomes who is wise and who is foolish, who is **prepared** and who is coming up with their own **plans**, who is ready to ride the wave of God's intervention and action, and who will be left standing on the beach, who will be invited inside the wedding banquet and who will be shocked to discover they've been shut out. As followers of Jesus, we are, in the language of the parable, to be like wise bridesmaids who are ready at any time to respond to the call of the Lord. How prepared are you?

Blessing: Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 6:23-24,

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. When you're invited to an event, do you usually arrive early, on time, or late?
What influences the timing of your arrival?
2. What, if anything, in the parable in Matthew 15:1-13 startles or surprises you?
3. Why were five of the bridesmaids considered wise? Why were the other five considered foolish?
4. Why didn't the wise bridesmaids share their oil with the foolish bridesmaids?
What are the implications of this for us?
5. What can and should we do so we're ready and prepared for Christ's return?
How does our behavior demonstrate what we believe?
6. What will be the reward for being prepared to greet Christ when He does return?