



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 12, 2017
WISDOM 6:12-16; PSALM 70; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18; MATTHEW 25:1-13

WISDOM AND WATCHFULNESS

Matthew 25:1-13 [*Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 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.' 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. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'"]*

Our first reading is from a book in the Hebrew Scriptures that we don't hear often. I remember clearly when I first encountered this book of poetry, called the Wisdom of Solomon. It was about 25 years ago. I was in my late 20's, building a marriage and a career in New York City, and my husband and I had begun to dream about having children.

But I didn't see how we could possibly start a family. He had recently taken a job with long hours and lots of travel. I was newly promoted at my firm and carrying more and more responsibility. We rarely had time during the week to have dinner together; how could we be responsible parents?

I was pretty stuck, worrying about the future, and then I went on a retreat at a Dominican convent outside Albuquerque, NM. When I met with one of the sisters for spiritual direction, she asked me why I was there. I told her some of my story and then we sat in silence. Finally, she opened her Bible and read from the book of Wisdom. Today we heard,

*Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who
love her,
and is found by those who seek her (6:12)*

The scripture goes on to say,

*There is in her a spirit that is intelligent,
holy . . .
loving the good, . . . steadfast, free from
anxiety. . .
She renews all things and in every
generation, she passes into holy souls
(7:22-23, 27)*

This idea of “capital W” Wisdom -- so pervasive and powerful and in such feminine terms -- took my breath away. I learned that in the Hebrew scriptures, this Wisdom -- Sophia -- is an attribute of God, but also a name for God’s presence among us and within us. The presence that fills us with awe and gratitude for the gift of life and enables us

to bear suffering and uncertainty with hope.

On that retreat, I remembered again the foundation of my faith, passed to me by my parents and grandparents: when we orient ourselves toward the wisdom of God, we can let go of worry about the future -- whether it’s about parenting, work, or other things. Not because we know the outcome or because everything will be easy, but because we trust all will be well through the love of God.

Our gospel today also has something to say about wisdom in the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. It’s not an easy parable, and it only appears in Matthew’s gospel. In his final teachings, Jesus warns his disciples that there will be difficult times in the days ahead and promises that God will not abandon them. And he tells them three parables about the importance of watchfulness, of being awake to God’s presence in their lives. The parable of the bridesmaids is one of them.

In hearing it today, it is easy to get distracted by the details -- the unpredictability of the bridegroom, the selfishness of the women who won’t share their oil, the injustice of excluding some from the wedding banquet. That’s not how Jesus treated people! So we have

to remember that parables are not a point-by-point lesson plan and try to put this one in the context of Jesus' time.

Typically, at the time for a wedding, the bride and her family would remain at her home and wait for the groom. The bridegroom and his party would travel to the bride's house at night, and the bridesmaids would go out with torches to greet them. Then with these women lighting the way, both families would walk to the groom's house for the marriage and several days of festivities. There was an element of surprise about the exact timing -- it was part of the excitement.

In the parable, the bridesmaids end up waiting much longer than anticipated, and they all get drowsy and fall asleep. Both the foolish ones and the wise ones. So it's not the falling asleep that's the problem. What distinguishes the wise ones is that they prepare for the wait and have enough fuel to make the journey. They wake up when they hear the bridegroom coming, trim their lamps and go out to greet him. These wise women are ready to provide light for their community as they make their journey in the dark.

When Jesus concludes this parable by saying, "therefore, keep awake," he isn't

admonishing his disciples to go without rest, to be superhuman. He's reminding them not to be dulled by the waiting, the difficult times, but to stay alert to God's presence among them so that they can shine light on it. They must be wise, prepared, and watchful -- sticking together in it all.

I am acutely aware that the last time I stood in this spot, offering a sermon, was the Sunday after the shootings in Las Vegas. And here we are again, praying for the families and souls of 26 unique, precious people, including 10 children, who were brutally killed one week ago. In church. It is senseless and horrible, and far too close to home.

The devastation of gun violence, the danger of assault weapons in the hands of unstable, angry people continues. And because it happened when people were gathered for worship, there is a deep kinship with those who grieve.

So, what do we do?

Today, as always, we gather with as a community to worship the one who created us. We gather to strengthen and encourage each other. And every day, we are watchful, learning how to spot violence and how to diffuse conflict. We stay awake to the needs of the world and

of this community. And we return to the foundation of our faith passed to us by the holy souls of every generation before us.

Did you see the large Celtic cross on the front of the Cathedral when you came in today? It went up this week -- the first time in Saint Mark's history there has been a cross on the front of the building. That cross proclaims to us and all who see it that the love of God has the last word and brings new life from places of misery and death. That cross affirms our commitment to provide light to our community, especially in times of

darkness.

The cross affirms our commitment to being part of God's renewal of the world by everything we do here -- worship, providing Sanctuary, speaking out against gun violence, caring for all children, honoring creation. And it proclaims that our hope comes not from knowing or controlling the future, but from trusting in and acting through the radiant and unfading Wisdom of God. Amen.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!