



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 27A, NOVEMBER 8, 2020
JOSHUA 24:1-3a, 14-25; PSALM 78:1-7; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18; MATTHEW 25:1-13

TRIMMING OUR LAMPS IN THE FIERCELY URGENT NOW

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.”]

April 4, 1967...The preacher stepped to the lectern at historic Riverside Church in New York City and spoke these fierce words to an America in crisis: “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”ⁱ

The prophet’s words have a way of speaking truth into different times, a way of speaking truth to us in the fiercely urgent NOW. The prophet was, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was speaking to all Americans—Black and White, Democrat and Republicans, rich and poor, coastal residents and those treading the broad swath of soil in between. He was exhorting all Americans

and, indeed, the world to come together in what King called “these revolutionary times.”

These revolutionary times... Can we allow our ears to be pricked with the prophet’s timeless words...in these revolutionary times?

King was quick to add that “A *genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional.*”

My friends, I am keenly aware that today half the nation celebrates, and half grieves, and we know that such grief manifests in all sorts of ways—denial, rationalization, cynicism, despair, apathy, complacency, and of course, anger with its sharp edge cutting its way into a fleshy and risky retribution.

I would suggest that there is not such a fine line separating us. The binary of celebration and grief in our nation is an illusion I think. We all grieve today, if we are honest.

You must decide what it is that you grieve, faced with the fact that tomorrow is today, that there is a fierce urgency of now. But whatever it is that you grieve, I encourage you to bring it to the surface, awaken to it, and let it inform your life in wholesome ways, and let it inform the loyalties you deem important in a genuine revolution of values. Failure to do that will mean a revolution that is nothing

more than a cyclical return to power structures that will fail us once more.

This is what the parable is really about in today’s gospel. To be sure, it’s a tough one to crack, and it has some sharp edges to contend with. We must acknowledge its culturally situated imagery in First Century Palestine, and yet there is gleaning to be gathered here. Another prophet speaking truth into our fiercely urgent NOW.

Marriage in that setting was marked by a series of key events—betrothal, wedding feast, ritual blessing and forging the marital union. The feast was a central way of inviting the couple’s families and friends together to celebrate in festive ways that were designed to ameliorate any tribal conflicts. It served a social purpose for the community, not just the couple.

The bridesmaids filled an important role in the banquet ritual which involved the bridegroom coming at sunset to the bride’s home, and the two of them, and their entourage, would be led by the lamps of the bridesmaids to the groom’s home where the feast would ensue, often for days.

The parable begins, *the kingdom of heaven will be likened to...*this, this anticipation of the wedding feast. But the bridesmaids do not all fulfill their roles. Half fail to bring

sufficient oil; all ten fall asleep. Chaos ensues, some are left out, and we are left wondering why such a harsh tale.

It requires some unpacking. Traditionally, Matthew's parables like this one are interpreted as God being the king whose son is the bridegroom, and the kingdom of heaven is juxtaposed to outer darkness where outsiders will find themselves weeping and gnashing their teeth.

I hope that rendering stops you short.

Amy Jill Levine suggests a feminist interpretation that does not involve a direct reference to God as the king or a divine paradigm of exclusionary power plays; rather, it is a critique on society. The king could be a human ruler, and his son the heir-apparent, with the sort of power that informs the familiar storylines of politics, social violence, and injustice.ⁱⁱ

We know that story, right?!

We are invited to identify with the bridesmaids whose role it is to lead the procession—to lead—to shine a light on the path for all to make their way, but to fulfill this important role they must have oil in their lamps.

Parabolic oil is not just oil; it is the metaphor for one's practiced and honed ability to be

present in the moment, and to share a light of truth and justice and mercy and love into that "fiercely urgent now" so that others might find their way.

There is no proxy for that spiritual practice of light-sharing; each of us must prepare ourselves for the task.

Which is why we espouse certain spiritual practices in this community—not to be good or right or righteous, but to hone the habits to be awake, to be ready, to be light-bearers. A means to an end. And in doing so we are transformed, and the world is transformed and healed, too.

What are your spiritual practices to prepare yourself for this important role in life?

As our nation waited this week in the uncertain stretch of days to settle an election, I found myself pondering two questions. What do we do if Trump wins? We keep focused on our mission of truth and justice and mercy and love. And what if Biden wins? Well, we keep focused on our mission of truth and justice and mercy and love.

The outcome of this election did not determine a different mission for this cathedral community, and it is clear that, as the nation grieves, and we all grieve, the prophet's words come to us once more:

Tomorrow is today. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action...and our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional.

To be clear—that doesn't mean we shove everything under the rug and pretend our differences don't matter. Let me offer an example, and I want to say the emphatic tone in my voice: If someone says that your marriage is no longer valid, this cathedral community will hold a lamp for you and say

ⁱhttp://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter14/MLKrivside.htm. It's worth noting that King was killed exactly one year later, April 4, 1968, a martyr for his faith.

it most certainly is! And then stand with others to correct that injustice.

There's a litany of specific ways we can stand faithfully in the breach of grief our nation is experiencing, but let me invite you to bring your enlightened voice to the conversation as we move forward.

Tomorrow is today. A fierce urgency.

So let us recommit to trimming our lamps. Right here. Right now.

ⁱⁱ *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*; AJ Levine, ed. A&C Black. 2001. Pg. 183ff. She also writes: "It would be better if we perhaps started with by seeing the parable not as about heaven or hell or final judgment, but about kings, politics, violence, and the absence of justice. If we do, we might be getting closer to Jesus." Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 282.



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