

Lectionary 32 A
Oil for Our Lamps

November 12, 2023
Matthew 25:1-13

We are waiting. No, not for Thanksgiving or Christmas – although we are waiting for those holidays. We are waiting for the return of Jesus. Christians have been waiting for Jesus for over 2000 years. Some think that the most important question to ask is, “When will this happen?” In fact, the disciples ask Jesus this question at the beginning of chapter 24 in Matthew.¹ Jesus answers this question very clearly later in the chapter: “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”² It does us no good to wonder about when this might happen, because no one has the answer – not even Jesus.

Another question the disciples asked was, “What are the signs of your coming and the end of the age?”³ Jesus hints at two answers to this question.

(1) The signs are always present: wars and rumors of wars, famine, earthquakes – such events have always been with us. We are still suffering the effects of a pandemic. There are wars in Ukraine and Gaza and in other places. There are earthquakes. Some years ago, friends lost their son in the earthquake in Haiti.

(2) When Jesus returns and the end happens – there will be no mistaking it. It will be like lightning flashes in the sky – everyone will see it; and trumpets blowing – everyone will hear it.

After Jesus deals with these questions in Matthew 24, he tells four parables that answer a different question – a question that I think is even more important for us: “What should we do while we wait?” Matthew was written some 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Those people were waiting for Jesus’ return. Some 2000 years later, we are still waiting. What do we do while we wait? Our gospel reading is the second of these parables. (You heard the first parable almost a year ago – on November 27, 2022.) You’ll hear the other two parables over the next two weeks.

Our parable is about ten young women who are waiting. What are they doing while they are waiting? They fall asleep. That sounds easy enough. I’ll volunteer for that job. There are other passages that talk about staying awake, but I like this passage better. The young women are not criticized for falling asleep while they wait. This suggests that our time of waiting for Jesus to return, should not be a stressful time in our lives – but a restful time. If someone is talking about the Second Coming and trying to get you all worried and fretful and anxious, remember these ten women – they fall asleep – and that was OK.

What was not OK was when the foolish ones ran out of oil. Lights don’t work without oil. The wise or thoughtful ones had brought extra oil. They were prepared for the delay of the bridegroom.

So, to answer the question: What should you do while waiting? You can sleep, but make sure you have enough oil to turn up your lights when the time comes. Be prepared – even while you sleep.

Shining lights are important symbols in Matthew. Earlier in this book, Jesus had said:

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ People do not light

¹ Matthew 24:3

² Matthew 24:36

³ Matthew 24:3

a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.⁴

Having lit lamps is related to doing good works for others; it is related to witnessing to the love of our Father in heaven; it is acting in ways that might lead others to give glory to our Father in heaven.

Those lights kept shining as long as there is oil. That's how our altar candles work. They are burning oil. If they run out of oil, they won't light.

I believe that in this parable, the oil represents the power to make our lights shine; the power to do good works; the power to witness and lead others to give glory to our Father heaven.

The parable also states that it is possible to run out of oil – to lose that power that enables us to have a light-shining life. How might this happen?

I think that it happens when we lose contact with God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is often pictured as a source of power. The Greek word translated "spirit" literally means: "wind" or "moving air". There's power in moving air. I've seen old windmills on Midwest ranches. I've seen acres and acres of windmills on windfarms in California. We've learned how to turn the power of wind into electric power that we use for our lights and other things.

God is the source of the power to live our light-shining lives.

I'm sure that many of you have moved at some time in your life. You leave family and friends behind. When you are separated by distance, it takes a greater effort to keep in contact: you send cards and letters – well, people used to do that; you make telephone calls, or nowadays, you connect through the internet, e-mails, instant messaging, text messages, and video conferencing.

Our family, who are living in three different states, Facetime with each other every Sunday. It's a way to stay connected. We share what's going on in our lives.

There are other folks from the past with whom I haven't kept contact with. I don't know about their present-day lives. They don't know about my present-day life. We no longer have the connection that we used to have.

This leads to another theme in our text: knowing and being known. The bridegroom tells the foolish women, "I do not know you." These are almost the exact same words used in an earlier story in Matthew:

²² "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you who behave lawlessly.'⁵

I have heard many evangelists ask, "Do you know the Lord?" That's the wrong question – at least from these texts. The question is, "Does the Lord know you?" The word "know" implies "having a relationship with." It's more than just knowledge in God's head.

"Yes," I hope you can answer. "I talk to the Lord often. I tell Jesus about my joys and

⁴ Matthew 5:14-16

⁵ Matthew 7:22-23

frustrations. I talk to him about what's going on in my life." It may be a bit like listening to your grandchildren – or to grandparents. A lot of what they say is trivial stuff, but you want to hear it. It keeps you in contact with them. It helps you know them. It keeps the relationship current.

What should you do while waiting? Talk to God – tell God about your life. God wants to hear from you – and often. God wants to know you; to be in a relationship with you.

Through this contact with God, God provides you with the oil of your life; the power to be shining lights in a world that has too much darkness. Every now and then, you can also fall asleep peacefully, knowing that the Lord knows you.