

**“Spiritual Wisdom for the Here and Now”**  
**Text: Isaiah 25:1, 6-10; Matthew 25:1-13**  
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*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. Matthew 25:1 & 2*

On Tuesday I was determined not to be a foolish bridesmaid. I wanted to be ready to meet the challenge of waiting in line to vote. I know that many of you were yourselves wise bridesmaids. You voted early and you told us about it, making the rest of us feel envious and anxious, but I don't like to vote early. I like to vote on Election Day. I knew I needed to plan ahead, so I got up and packed my tote bag early in the morning. I put in a thermos of coffee, a bottle of water, a *New Yorker* magazine, a novel, and two newspapers. I also put a folding chair in the trunk of the car, thinking that I might have to sit down after three or four hours of waiting. I was ready for anything except what actually happened. First of all, they didn't allow folding chairs in the polling place. Second, there was no time to read more than a sentence or two before being told to move forward. You know - you move forward, and you stop, and you move forward and stop. My tote bag was heavy, and my purse was heavy, and I put both on the floor and kind of kicked them along. I had time to sip only a couple swallows of coffee before I was shown into the voting booth. In my zeal not to appear to be a foolish bridesmaid, I had over prepared.

In the story that Jesus told, the five foolish ones took their lamps but forgot to take the oil that was needed to fuel them. When the bridegroom came, they were out of supplies and in the dark. It was a common practice at ancient weddings that the bridegroom would go to the house of the bride, who would then come forth out of the door with her bridesmaids, and together they would all parade to the house of the bridegroom, where the rest of the wedding ceremony would take place. (1) All along the way, the bridesmaids' lamps would light the path.

The bridesmaids that Jesus called wise did not over-prepare, but neither did they under-prepare. We don't know how much oil the wise ones had; for all we know, they had no more than they carried with them, or they could have had a couple of barrels-full in the carport at home. (2) What mattered was that five were ready, and five were unready to deal with life as it actually unfolded. The variable in the story is the timing of the bridegroom's appearance on the scene. If he had come early or when expected, there would have been no problem for anybody. But he

delayed much longer than anybody had expected, and when he finally arrived, five of the bridesmaids hustled off to try to buy supplies at the store. When they returned, the procession had already gone to the bridegroom's house. The door was shut, and even though they knocked on the door and begged to come in, the bridegroom said, "I do not know you."

I am reading Marilyn Robinson's brilliant new novel about a father who receives a letter from his son, who had left home 20 years before under a dark cloud. The letter read simply, "Dear Father, I will be coming to Gilead in a week or two. I would like to stay a while. Respectfully, Jack."

The father is elated. "I wasn't sure I would live to see this day," the father said in anticipation. But the son failed to arrive. Day after day the father looked down the road: no son in sight. The cream pies that had been baked were covered with thick skin; the lettuce in the refrigerator went limp; there was worry that the boy would never come. But finally, there he was, and there father and son were, embracing.

"Son, I have been wearing my necktie for days, and here you are catching me in my nightshirt after all." Expectant waiting is rewarded at last.(3)

I've been thinking about *The Color Purple* in recent days and Alice Walker's brilliant depiction of Celie and her sister Nettie - and how it is that Nettie is sent away, or goes away to Africa with the missionaries who have adopted her, and how Celie waits every day for a letter to come. The letters do come, but the feckless husband hides them, and Celie thinks she has been forgotten. But she never gives up hoping that she will see her sister again. Her faithful expectant waiting is rewarded. (4) You remember the last scene in the movie: the field of lavender, the love, the rejoicing over the homecoming, all the waiting forgotten.

I feel as if our nation has been waiting for a new day, patiently, hopefully. Who can doubt that for many Americans, particularly those of African-American descent, the election of Barack Obama is something that has been dreamed about for so many years. I was moved by the letter Alice Walker sent to President-elect Obama last week. "You have no idea, really," she wrote, "of how profound this moment is for us. [Us being the black people of the Southern United States]. . . . seeing you deliver the torch so many others before you carried, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, only to be struck down before igniting the flame of justice. . . [To see you now] is almost more than the heart can bear. . . .Because of the relay runners who ran before you, North America is a different place. We knew, through all the generations, that you were with us, the best of the spirit of Africa and in the best spirit of the Americas. Knowing this, that you would actually appear, someday, was part of our strength. Seeing you take your place based on your wisdom, stamina and character is a balm for the weary warriors of hope. . . ." Sometimes waiting and waiting and waiting is rewarded.

I feel that in some deep down, important way, today is a day of fulfillment for our congregation, sort of like a homecoming day for our church. Little Harrison James came home today. He took his place as a baby in good standing in the household of God. Our new members, Marlo and the others, they have come home too. I marvel at the wonderful things God is doing right now and has done to bring us to this glad moment of vitality and recommitment. How does Isaiah say it? "It will be said on that day, 'Lo, this is our God. We have been waiting for him so long that he might save us. Let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation.'" I believe God made this day for no other reason than that we should be glad and rejoice in it.

It is not always easy to be glad and rejoicing. Sometimes things can be so bad and so gloomy, day after day, sad and gloomy, that we forget that joy lies at the heart of reality. We forget that weeping is real and happens to us all, but "weeping lingers only for the night; joy comes with the morning." Sometimes we run out of steam, and go to sleep, and when the watchmen shouts, "Look! Here, he's coming!" We roll over and plump our pillow and go back to sleep. We are so disheartened, we have nothing to offer to the possibility of a new day - got no light to shine, no joy to share.

Followers of the early Christian movement had been told to look for Jesus to return to earth any day, but he had failed to appear. What was the church to do in the meantime? Matthew makes an incredible connection, so compelling to me, between this parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, and believe it or not, the Sermon on the Mount. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my father. Many will want to gain entrance to the kingdom, but I will declare to them 'I never knew you.'" That's exactly what the bridegroom said to the foolish bridesmaids - *I never knew you*.

How do we wait, and how do we watch? I would suggest that we who follow Christ wait and watch, not by watching but by doing. There is no need to scan the horizon. Watching consists of doing what Jesus told us to do, living the way he showed us how to live: judging not, lest we be judged, but giving, forgiving our enemies, living in hope, not storing up for ourselves treasures on earth but treasures in heaven, for where our treasures are there our heart will be also. We watch for Jesus by doing what Jesus said. We bring the oil of our actual living, day by day, to serve the great purposes of God. We live and give generously and hopefully, so that signs of the kingdom can be nourished and encouraged to grow all around us.

This is been such an important election, one of the most important in our history. I hope you all voted. Today I hope all of you will vote again. This time, the occasion is a referendum on whether or not we are ready to embrace the new

tomorrow that God is offering to us, or whether we are going to turn over and go back to sleep.

We need pledges and tithes of almost \$700,000 in order to serve adequately the needs of our church in the coming year, and the needs of the community we were put in this world to serve. Either we insist on the old reality, or we live toward the glimpses and glimmers we get at something better that is emerging among us. (8) That is what you and I will decide today. I know you share my conviction that we have an important, integral role to play in what is happening in our neighborhood, and in our city, and in our world today. The only question is whether we will have enough oil, are ready to respond to the needs of tomorrow, able to rejoice with singing, to serve our Lord in the city, and if I can just mention it one more time - to make sure our kids have enough choir robes to go around.

I love that old story of the preacher who stood up in his pulpit on Commitment Sunday and said, "I've got good news and I've got bad news. The good news is that there are plenty of resources to do what needs to be done in the year ahead. The bad news is that the money is still in your pocket."

There are two ways or reasons to give. Both have validity. Some of us give out of a sense of duty. Thank God there are people who feel obligated to give. Faith demands it. God summons us to it. God loves the dutiful as well as the cheerful giver. I like the other way of giving too - the kind of giving that comes from celebrating the richness of life.

I read about a senior risk manager for a large capital corporation, a woman named Barbara Moss. She writes, "Like many, I've been thinking about how to cut back during this difficult financial time. Surprisingly, I found that I would happily downsize my house and cut back my entertainment, but I wanted to hold on to the liberating joy of giving. Money feels most richly spent when it calls me to serve the world. And so my apartment is on the market, and I have my eye on a wonderful, smaller version just around the corner." (9) Barbara Moss - a person with her lamp trimmed just right for the living of these days.

Early one morning, when my husband was staying in the guest room of our son's house in Richmond, he was startled awake from a sound sleep by Charlie our three-year-old grandson. "Grandpop!" he shouted, about an inch from Al's ear.

Al awoke with a start, sat up in bed and said, "Good morning, Charlie."

Charlie smiled and said, "Good morning, Grandpop," and off they went headlong into the delight of a new day.

Sometimes God slips in the door and surprises us with newness, with glimpses and glimmers of the great promise that is ours through Christ our Lord. Just look.

You'll see. He's coming, our Savior, again and again, into your life and mine. Be ready to rejoice with him every time he comes to where you are.

In Proverbs it is written that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Combine that with discipline, and you are on the path to life at its fullest. As we come forward to bring our pledge cards this morning, I rejoice with you that we have the chance now to step afresh onto that path of full and abundant life. I invite you who are members and you who are friends of our church to come forward and place your commitments on the communion table. It is at that table where God offers us the bread of life and a cup of the new covenant sealed in the blood of our Lord. Thanks be to God for the opportunity to give as well as to receive.

- (1) Lewis Donelson, *Lectioary Homiletics*, October/November 2008, p. 48.
- (2) Anna Carter Florence, *Lectioary Homiletics*, October/November 2008, p.53.
- (3) *Home*.
- (4) As retold by Rochelle Stackhouse in *Lectioary Homiletics*, October/November 2008, p.51.
- (5) Isaiah 25:9.
- (6) Psalm 30:5.
- (7) Donelson.
- (8) Robert McAfee Brown, as quoted by K. C. Ptomey, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee.
- (9) From a column in *Auburn Views*, Winter 2004.