

Last week we concluded our series *Virtue Renews the World* and today we resume our regular practice of meditating on the lectionary readings used across the ACNA. Last week we also set our clocks backwards, thus upending everyone's circadian rhythms, especially those human beings called children. It's timely to hear the Lord say today, 'Watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour.' Parents of young children can say, 'I couldn't agree more.'

You also might do a double take on clock and calendar regarding the church year. No, this is not the first Sunday of Advent. Advent doesn't begin until December 3rd, yet today's Gospel parable about the ten virgins sure sounds like an Advent story with its themes of watching, waiting, and preparation. Even though we might feel out of sync in a few ways, let's keep exploring story to find ways this parable intersects with our lives in November 2017.

Just a few weeks ago I preached on Abraham's encounter with God, when the Lord lifted Abraham's eyes in the night sky to behold stars he could not number. The timing of that story shapes the whole story. Matthew gives us a timestamp in Jesus' parable, too, because the night hours shape the whole story of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom.

The other main feature of this parable is a wedding feast, which cannot begin until the bridegroom appears. So Jesus' story sets a stark contrast from the beginning: the darkness of the night hours and the joyful celebration of a wedding party.

Let's talk about those night hours. The night hours represent both expectation and living with an unknown future, seen through the experience of ten virgins waiting to meet the bridegroom. What's happening here?

Kenneth Bailey tells us that in ancient Jewish wedding rituals, a

wedding feast would begin *after* the bride and groom had completed a long, slow parade through their home villages. And here are the order of events in that ritual. The groom departs his family home on the back of a riding animal. After the groom departs to meet his bride, family members, villagers, and young women (ten virgins) gather at the groom's home waiting for the newly married couple to arrive. And they wait.

Meanwhile, the groom takes his journey to the home of his bride. When he arrives, the bride joins him on said riding animal. The destination of the bride and groom is the groom's family home. Now a parade begins and the groomsmen start the party. The goal in this parade is to take a long time. And there's a reason for that. The long, slow parade means that they will travel as many streets as possible, meaning that every family along the parade route can celebrate this marriage.

Back at the groom's home, everyone is getting tired. This is taking a long time. They don't know how long til the parade makes it back to the groom's home, so everyone goes to bed. The wedding parade has already begun, but it's out of earshot, out of sight. It's the dead of night and no one knows *when* the groom will arrive with his bride. /

Step out of the context of an ancient Jewish wedding for a moment and think about how you experience the night hours in 2017. Think about those times when something in your life has affected your sleep, when you've been awake for long portions of the night.

Isn't it interesting how the same number of night hours can feel totally different? If you have an event happening the next day requiring your energy, focus, your best performance, you can become anxious about the sleep you're losing, the sleep you *need*, and the hours can move more *quickly*.

On the other hand, if you're awake and trying to process troubles that have *already* happened, but with no clear next steps or no clear solution, the night hours seem to move much more *slowly*. Those nights seem much longer. You understand why the psalmist prayed, 'How long, O Lord?!' These are the nights when we suffer from our helplessness, the darkness of our limited knowledge, the weariness that weighs upon body and soul.

Last Sunday when we gathered for morning worship, we did not know that night was descending upon a small Baptist church in Sutherland Springs, TX. When we learn the horrific news that 26 saints became martyrs on All Saints Sunday, we cry out, 'How long is this night, O Lord?' How long must evil remain in this good world you created? How long must innocent lives be lost in violence and bloodshed? No one has answers but we can pray our questions in the night hours, with the psalms as our prayer manual.

And I know that there are many who are tired and even angry with the call to prayer after such tragedies. But if we do not pray we lose our holiest words to lament and grieve these atrocities. If we do not pray, we cannot hear God's call to Kingdom actions. You see, prayer has been, is, and forever will be the *engine* of Gospel action among God's people. Prayer is the oil in our lamps, lighting the way in which we should go. Prayer lights the way to take steps toward the good (and difficult) works of peacemaking, compassion, justice, and mercy.

We might be a few weeks away from Advent, but we need to hear the Advent words from Isaiah in these night hours for American Christians, especially for those in Sutherland Springs, TX. For Isaiah prayed with boldness, 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence...From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God

besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.' Yes, I want to hear the Lord's voice again, promising his peaceable kingdom and a new Jerusalem where 'no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days.' For in that peaceable kingdom, 'They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain¹.' That is the story that guides the people of God through long night hours. And in Sutherland Springs, TX, this morning, Christians gather to pray and worship the Lord who sustains them with comfort and hope in these night hours.

The truth of our story is that we cannot bring an end to the night in our own efforts. We cannot accelerate the bridegroom's pace to begin the wedding feast on our terms. But we do have lamps in our possession, just as *all* ten virgins owned lamps in this story. It was the *oil* that was lacking for five of those ten young women. /

If you look closely at this story, you'll see that *all* ten young women had lamps, *all* got tired, *all* slept before the bridegroom arrived. The great difference was the stock of oil. Five prepared for that long night with plenty of oil; five did not prepare for that long night. But when the bridegroom *finally* arrived at his home *with his bride*, *all* ten young women awoke. *All* trimmed the wicks, but only half had enough oil to light those lamps.

And here is where we need more cultural insight to the story. When the groom arrives at his home with his bride, it's time to begin the wedding feast. But remember it's still night. How are you going to identify the invited guests? You need a positive ID. How do you do that in the ancient world? You need to see their face. Which means each guest needs enough oil in their lamps to illuminate their faces when they meet the bridegroom. Sadly, five young women did not enter the

joy of the feast because they did not expect the bridegroom to come when he did. If we don't prepare, don't expect the coming of the King in our waiting, we can miss the Kingdom.

During my seminary days in North Carolina, I served as a chaplain intern for nine months at a urban homeless ministry similar to Knox Area Rescue Mission, but with even a wider range of services. I had a wonderful, laid-back pastoral mentor at this ministry. We had good chats each week about ministry among the homeless population, but it was hard for me to focus sometimes. His speaking voice was nearly identical to the legendary Cubs announcer, Harry Caray. [Just once I wanted him to end our pastoral talks with 'Cubs win! Cubs win!']

Early in my internship, my mentor outlined my primary role as a chaplain intern. "The fact that you're here and available is the main thing." That sounded nice and all, but this was a lengthy internship. I'd make rounds in the dining hall and have chats with people, but that would fill 1/3 of my hours. There was a lot of idle time and eventually got I bored just being available.

I wanted to do something tangible to serve 'the least of these' as Jesus said in Matthew 25. So I began serving in the clothes ministry, the food ministry, and served in the emergency assistance department, assessing needs of those struggling with utility bills, rent payments, etc. These were all good works that the people of God ought to do. And I enjoyed doing them.

Then one day I was in an interview room conducting an emergency assistance assessment, when the volunteer leader interrupted our conversation, saying, 'We've been looking everywhere for you.' Ok, when you're the intern and someone says, 'We've been looking everywhere for you,' you're not excited about whatever's coming next. Then the leader said, "We had someone who was very distressed and

they specifically asked to speak with a pastor. You weren't back in the chaplain's office and we haven't been able to find you."

I asked if the person was still there, and the volunteer said, "I'm not sure, let's go check." Then we went to the small sitting area outside the chaplain's office. No one was seated there. "I guess they left," the volunteer said. And then my heart sank.

That was simultaneously one of the most painful *and* most important days I've experienced in pastoral ministry. I learned the cost of my impatience. I learned to trust that even when it seems like *nothing* is happening, *God is drawing near*, though I may not perceive it.

I don't want to miss the Kingdom of God, both now *and* on that final day when the Bridegroom comes for his Bride, the Church. I want the King to recognize my face by the light he's given me. And that means trusting him replenishing the oil of his grace in my soul. You know, these lamps didn't have a large capacity, a large tank for oil. They had to keep refilling them. It's just like manna. You can't stockpile it. We replenish the flickering light in our souls on a daily basis. How? By *abiding in the Holy Spirit*. For the Holy Spirit is the both the oil and the flame that illuminates our souls and bodies. The Holy Spirit speaks kindness within. The Holy Spirit heals our wounds. The Holy Spirit gives peace that passes all understanding. The Holy Spirit comforts our weary souls. He is the oil and the flame. And he's preparing us to greet the Bridegroom when he comes for his Bride.

Even in these long night hours, when that wedding parade is out of earshot and out of sight, the King is coming. Let us prepare to greet him and enter the joy of his Kingdom. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Isaiah 65.1, 17ff