

Amos 5:18-24

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 25:1-13

¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But 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.’ ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

The Waiting Game November 12, 2017

In a recent conversation, a woman from the congregation asked me, “Did I enjoy my kisses?” I told her I’ve never had so many kisses in as long as I could remember and, thank you so much!” Now if you had overheard that conversation you might possibly draw the wrong conclusion about what was going on. For you see, as it turns out, there were two women involved who were both responsible for all the kisses. It was one of the sweetest moments and I won’t soon forget it, and I’ve been enjoying those kisses for a few weeks. Now that I have your attention, this is what really happened. It was simply a gift of a jar of Hershey’s Kisses. It was pastor appreciation month and I had been getting little gifts all month. I also got beaned, with some canned green beans, and I also got pretty sauced one Sunday, with some spaghetti sauce and salsa. Any of these words might have led to a scandalous rumor if you didn’t know the context. And I am telling you this because that is what we need to consider as well, anytime we read the bible. Context is always important, and you should always consider the social, historical, and theological background before you jump to any conclusions.

In the chapter preceding our reading today Matthew’s Jesus speaks about the tragedy to come regarding the temple. “That not one stone will be left upon another,” he says, and then goes on to answer their questions about when these things will be. Now we already know that Matthew is writing after this has taken place so one can readily see where some of this story comes from. Rome burned this place to the ground and it was a horrible and unspeakable time for God’s people. And for many followers of Jesus, when these things happened, they began to wonder where is God, and when will Jesus return and put all to right? Jesus tells them there will be persecution, false messiahs, nation against nation, earthquakes, famine, a litany of woe and despair. This is an End Times, Apocalyptic scenario which can be very frightening, and often when taken out of context, very

disturbing. But the concluding statements and the stories that follow speak to the need to be prepared, to be ready, that those who don't lose hope, will be saved. And then Jesus tells us about 10 bridesmaids who, while waiting for the Bridegroom, are surprised by his unexpected arrival. These stories are about waiting. Waiting and living in what we call, the time in between. With our eyes on eternity and our feet on the ground is how I like to think of it.

Life is a challenge for many people in the world. As I considered this text I couldn't help but think of those people who have been caught in the embrace of war, of Syrian refugees, of Rohingya Muslims being persecuted and killed in Myanmar, and many others who are fearful for their very lives. I thought of those faced with the total destruction of their property like many in Houston, Florida, and Puerto Rico. And then, of course, those caught in the barrage of bullets and the families dealing with the loss of loved ones in senseless shootings.

And then I encounter those who are hungry right here at home. Living with a sense of desperation about how to feed and care for themselves and their families. And it becomes easily understandable when faced with these things that we cry out, "Come Quickly, Lord Jesus." This life is too much, and we yearn for the end of time, for apocalyptic events and signs that signal the end of suffering and pain. Hope is lost, our lamps are out of oil, and it is dark! And Matthew's folks felt the same way, wondering, Where the Heck is Jesus? He hasn't returned, and we are waiting, waiting, waiting...we are waiting, still.

When the unexpected happens, are we ready, prepared? I'm not talking about having enough bread and milk and batteries when the snow storm hits. Nor about where you keep your important documents should you need to leave during a flood or fire as many have experienced over the last few months in our country. No, I'm wondering how do we prepare our hearts and spirits as we wait? As we live in this 'in-between time', as we keep ourselves ready for the unexpected challenges of life, and maybe also, the unexpected presence of God, the Divine, of Jesus; how do we keep our lamps full of oil?

The stories that we hear over the next couple of Sunday's remind Matthews folks and us as well, how we should be living in this world as we wait. And the sense I get is that the oil, which becomes a major theme in the story, represents our individual spiritual lives and disciplines, or the ways we restore and strengthen our spirits as we live in this time and place. Prayer, service to others, reading and meditating on the Word, working for justice, worshipping together, being with others who wait. Being awake to the many encounters you have with the Risen Jesus. "Staying Awake" as Jesus says. Living and serving. These are some of the ways we keep oil in our lamps; the way we keep the light shining in the darkness.

Pastor Janet Hunt shared these thoughts this week. She said, "For oh, it seems to me that 'keeping awake' as we are told to do in Jesus' words today is simply this. Knowing that we have all that we need as we 'keep awake' if only we will receive it. If only we will remember that we need it. If only we will remember that we have a constant source of 'fresh water,' a steady supply of precious 'oil' to help light our way. For we already have Jesus as we await the 'bridegroom's' return.' We already have Jesus. If only we will pause long enough to recognize and receive this precious gift, it is already ours. All we have to do is fill our lamps.

And that has to be enough on those days when our hearts break at the pain and suffering in this world. For alone we cannot alter or change it. But we can keep our lamps full of oil. We can keep our lights shining as signs of promise and hope. We have more than enough to do this. And for now, isn't that enough? And in the end, isn't that really everything? Indeed, isn't this what the world needs most of all?"

A story shared by Pastor Jane Ferguson was one that I found very powerful. It goes like this:

"A wise woman who was traveling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream.

The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime.

But, a few days later, he came back to return the stone to the wise woman. "I've been thinking," he said. "I know the great value of this stone, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me this stone."

Sometimes it's not the wealth you have but what's inside you that others need."

So my suggestion is that you live in such a way as to keep hope alive. The future Kingdom of God will come in its own good time and we hope for that. But the present Kingdom, the one we pray about when we pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" ... requires your lamp to be ready to shine at a moment's notice.

If ever there were a time to sing, *This Little Light of Mine*, I guess it would be on this Sunday. But perhaps a more fitting song would be this...(pick up your guitar)

When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed his own blood for my soul. It is well...with my soul; it is well; it is well with my soul.

I'll segue to *This Little Light of Mine* to close adding these verses...Everywhere I go...Out there in the dark