

Sermon: Remembrance Sunday, November 12, 2017 – Matthew 25: 1-13
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Be Prepared: those two noble words have etched themselves onto the psyche of anyone who was involved in Scouting. In the words of Lord Baden-Powell himself, to Be Prepared is to be “always ready to do what is necessary to help others. It also means you are ready, willing, and able to do what is necessary in any situation that comes along. You are also being prepared to live a full and worthwhile life, being a physically fit, honorable citizen of strong character.”

Being prepared nowadays often looks more like this: (emergency preparedness kit). Whether one anticipates potential flood, fire, earthquake, blizzard, power outage or, heaven help us, if the WiFi goes out, folks who work in emergency services wisely counsel us to plan ahead, just in case. The government of Canada puts it succinctly: “If an emergency happens in your community, it may take emergency workers some time to reach you. You should be prepared to take care of yourself and your family for a minimum of 72 hours.”

On this Remembrance Day weekend, I cannot help but think of what “being prepared” would have looked like for Canadian military personnel readying themselves for unknown engagement. You were trained, you’d walked through the various possibilities in your mind, but there was no way of knowing what would actually happen once the bullets started flying. In my life I have been so fortunate, that the times I have dreaded something it’s been something simple, like delivering very bad news to someone, or having to confront a irrational fear. But these men and women had to prepare for what might be their last breath...and I try to never take that for granted, for their engagement of a terrible task in horrific circumstances, is why I’ve never had to.

“Being Prepared” is a theme that goes right back to the earliest days of our Christian heritage as well, as reflected in the curious parable we heard this morning. For early believers, being prepared meant readiness for an event they fully expected to happen within days – the return of Christ, fully ushering in a new era of Shalom. So they shared stories with one another, like this story of bridesmaids, to both encourage and correct one another as they stayed alert for an event they hoped would be just around the corner.

And it’s at this point of the sermon that everything stalls for me. Or perhaps I should rephrase that: this is the point of the sermon when my mind tries to run off in at least five different directions, for one basic reason: I simply don’t want to think about the end times, let alone preach on them, so ANY other direction I can find, is a preferable way to go.

But the 24th and 25th chapters of Matthew are, from start to finish, completely focused on the final days and final judgment. There is no argument to be made that all of a sudden, Matthew decided to switch themes and talk about something else. So as much as I might want to run away from it, this scripture is concerned with end times, portrayed here as the return of the bridegroom. Its uncompromising portrayal of the “ready” being ushered in to the wedding banquet, and the unprepared/distracted being stranded forever out in the dark, is an image that fills me with dread.

I hear this story, a story involving perhaps hundreds of people, and I only see the five bridesmaids who are unprepared. They have run out of oil – which seems like such a minor issue - and paid dearly for their error. How many ways does that describe the way I assess my life: misreading the importance of something, walking by instead of jumping in, letting down the side. Unlike other pieces of scripture which I can see it from many angles, here I can only identify with those who have foolishly run out of oil and my heart is filled with fear.

And in that place of helplessness, I meet Christ. And as always happens when Jesus and I stop to chat, I am guided to step away from my fear, as I am shown the bigger picture.

The bigger picture of this scripture lesson, is that it is about a celebration. I’ve always known this reading as “the wise and foolish virgins”- each bridesmaid being a prospective bride herself - but it should properly be entitled, “the joyous arrival of the bridegroom” or to paraphrase a recent sermon title from my friend Michael Ward, “there’s a party starting and you’re invited!” Our focus is on the ten bridesmaids and the choices they make, especially the five that mess up, but **in the final analysis their actions neither make the party nor ruin the party**. By my slender understanding of the wedding customs of the day,

these ten bridesmaids had the wonderful honour of ushering in the bride and groom to a party that started at night and would go on for as long as a week. Their lamps would shine like spotlights on the happy couple. They had the great opportunity of getting the party started. All they had to do, was make sure there was enough oil in their lamps. (And as a quick aside here, once I understood their task, I also understood why the five with oil couldn't possibly share with the others: better to have five lights burning brightly to illuminate the bride and groom's festive arrival, than to have all ten lights run low and fizzle out).

If I hear this story only as a cautionary and highly individualistic morality tale – as I have always done in the past - I will miss out on the good news; and that is, **there's a party to get ready for, and everyone's invited.** And the way I get ready for the party, is to embrace all those opportunities that keep coming my way in life, to spread Christ's vision of a world where all are honoured by living generously. In the way I live my life as a disciple and in our life as a congregation, our party preparations involve giving ourselves over to Christ's own spirit of openness, and honesty, and justice, and compassion in our relationship with our neighbours. Rather than viewing my life as a series of tests that I either pass or fail, and making this a selfish little story about getting into the party or not getting into the party, this promise of a time of rejoicing invites me to stop being so cautious, and start living abundantly. God wants this party to be huge, starting with those folks who constantly get the doors of this world shut in their faces, and welcomes us to view our lives as a time to invite, and prepare, and enjoy. The God of grace, the God we know through Jesus, has gone ahead to make things ready, and our job is to ready ourselves and others for a realm of shared joy, unlimited peace, boundless generosity, and fearless inclusion, by making those same qualities the hallmark of our life together.

Yes, there are hard aspects to this story: five bridesmaids, who had such a great opportunity to celebrate, are stranded outside because they weren't ready. Indeed, every segment of this end-times narrative of Matthew 24 and 25, presents a stark picture for those who are unwilling or unready to choose love. At no point does Matthew suggest that there are no boundaries or accountability or consequences. But here's the thing: because Jesus is at heart a door-opener rather than a door-closer, there is a profound and wonderful consistency to what we are asked to do and be. We are to **believe in** the power of love, and **be** the power of love, and **trust in** the one who embodied courageous, affirming, enlivening love. Shown the folly of holding tight to other ways, we are invited to prepare for a time when all that will remain, is the power of love.

When I take step away from a narrow view that sees life as all about me and my personal successes and shortfalls, toward a broad view of the glory that God intends for all creation, this story doesn't change but I see so much more of it. And when I see more of the party, and how complete the invitation to come and enjoy – I become quite a bit less hesitant to think and talk about this new age that Jesus has begun. I have always understood that the promised new realm is amazing, yet have foolishly let my fears of personal shortfall overshadow the glory of the promise. That's not to say that discipleship is easy, for it explicitly is not; there are some tough choices that everyone will need to make, and some challenging boundaries for us to break down, together, and places where we will need to have courage beyond our own, but we are never alone when taking these steps along the path of Christ Jesus.

And that is good news indeed, in these tumultuous times. It's one thing to "be prepared" when you can envision the potential challenges ahead, but quite another thing when the lines between opinion and information and fact and fiction are being repeatedly and intentionally blurred by world leaders and news outlets and social media. Christ gives a wonderful horizon line but it can be difficult to see with all the trash presently piled up between here and there... which once again reminds us of how important it is not only to trust what is on the horizon, but to enjoy the companions we have been given to share the tasks of faithfully forging ahead, and to continually encourage one another along the way. That rhythm of invitation and encouragement defines who we are, I hope, as a community of faith.

For we are called to be loving...and courageous. To be loving... and steadfast. To be loving...and persistent. To be loving...and resilient. To keep on giving ourselves to the power of Christ's unfolding love, even when everything around us tells us that there are "better ways to get ahead in this world." Being prepared, and forging ahead with love, seldom comes easy, but its big-picture beauty is worthy beyond our wildest imagination. Thanks be to God, Amen.

~ ~ ~

In the spirit of “being prepared”... and being courageous... and remaining committed to the goal of peace even when everything is stacked against you... we now move into a time of remembrance. This weekend we have the opportunity to remember all those whose lives have been impacted by war, including those ducking for cover at this moment.

We bring to mind with thankfulness all who were willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of future generations... those who gave their lives doing so... those whose lives were changed forever because of war... and pray for peace, as we take a minute of solemn silence.

Reference cited:

Baden-Powell, Robert quoted at <http://www.boyscouttrail.com/boy-scouts/boy-scout-motto.asp>

For further reading:

Davis, Mark. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.ca/2017/11/pity-fools.html> and <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.ca/2008/11/delay-of-parousia-in-early-church.html>

Hunt, Janet. <http://dancingwiththeword.com/oil-for-our-lamps/>

Milner, Liz. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1534-my-bad-dream>

Pope, Charles. <http://blog.adw.org/2014/08/what-were-weddings-like-in-jesus-day/>
<http://www.thewayprepared.com/studies/wise-foolish-virgins.html>

© 2017 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church