

# Covenant Word

## ***Running Right on Time***

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-18; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

*A Message by  
The Reverend Sarah  
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Sunday  
November 12, 2017*

Lloyd left us early the day of the race. The start line was all the way out on Staten Island, so he literally had trains to catch and ferries to ride just to arrive at the start line. Dan, David, Joe, Joes' father, friend Melissa and I gathered for bagels and coffee. We looked over maps and checked our phones to be sure Lloyd's whereabouts were showing up. You see, he had a chip embedded in his race bib number, and we could find him on the marathon course at most any time. The trick was to coordinate ourselves in movement and location so that we would coincide with his path. His pace was steady and predictable

so that as we stood and waited and watched, he would run down the street not too early, not too late, but right on time. So at the 59th Street Bridge: not too early, not too late, right on time. At 72nd Street: not too early, not too late, right on time. At 125th Street, not too early, not too late, right on time. But by the time, we got to the home stretch around Central Park, we waited and waited. By this time, we had made friends with other spectators, and so they joined us in chanting "Roll Tide Roll" as our runner came down the center of Fifth Avenue. He told me later, "That was just what I needed to get to the finish line. It lifted my spirit, and I ran with more purpose after that." It was a boost that came not too early, not too late, but right on time.

The groom of today's parable needs one of those tracking chips in the lapel of his tuxedo, because he is neither early or on time. He is dreadfully late. The whole parable seems to hinge on his tardiness. I wonder if the bride has any idea that her groom has a tendency to be so late. Is he always pushing the clock or has he developed a case of the wedding day

jitters that has him procrastinating his arrival? The way Jesus tells it, the bride asks ten of her friends to be the bridesmaids at her wedding. Their sole duty is to joyfully welcome the groom when he arrives for the wedding feast, so they bring lamps and oil, so that their joy is illuminated. The only problem is that some don't bring enough oil to keep their lamps lit when the groom is incredibly tardy.

Now we are smart people, wise in the ways of finding solutions that are more likely to include everyone than to purposefully force others to miss a celebration. We are primed for Jesus to do the same in this story. After all, isn't he the very one who tells a story about a vineyard owner who pays all the workers the same wage no matter what time they arrive at the field to work? But such grace is not found in today's parable. This story tells of the original mean girls who are unwilling to share their oil with the other bridesmaids and then send them out into the night to purchase more thus missing the entire celebration. Does it heighten the wise bridesmaids' sense of personal importance that they came prepared and are now the only ones present to greet the groom once he arrives?

## ***Such grace is not found in today's parable. This story tells of the original mean girls.***

Lauren Winner of Duke University says: (TheHardestQuestion.org/yeara/ordinary32gospel/)

Supposedly, somewhere, there's a sisterhood. Supposedly, somewhere women are more empathetic, and relational and naturally inclined to share. But really, when it comes down to it, many women are taught to compete with other women. We're taught that out precarious places [in our marriages and in our careers and in our churches] will be unsettled by another woman's presence, that our success will be threatened by another woman's flourishing. ...[these bridesmaids] are protecting their own position rather than, in the interest of helping other women, risking it. In my imagining of the story, the wise virgins aren't just wise, they are also catty.

Maybe we should not lay complete blame on the bridesmaids when the groom deserves an angry mother-in-law's tongue lashing. He is so late that everyone has been up all night long waiting and waiting. The tension in the story is

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for  
wanting to read and  
study these thoughts  
more carefully.  
Please know that I do  
not take full credit for  
anything that may be  
contained within,  
because I may have  
read or heard  
something at some  
point during my  
pilgrimage and do not  
remember its source  
and thus, cannot give  
the rightful author  
his/her credit. I pray  
that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**



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morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible  
study at 10:30 a.m.

released if he could only arrive not too early, not too late, but right on time. And to top it all off, when the five return from purchasing oil for their lamps, the groom insults them by saying, "I don't even know who you are" and refuses them entry. He vaporizes their friendship because of tardiness! (Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Unfolding Light") Did he miss Jesus' parable about the speck and log in your own eye? The oil-lacking maidens live with the hope that the bride and groom would rather have their company than their lit lamps. The bride is strangely silent on this point, but then, who can hear her voice over the groom's clear declaration that he does not know the women knocking at the door.

I wonder if this isn't the essence of the parable: how we sometimes get so easily distracted and overly consumed by our own worries that we fail to be graciously present for one another. The "wise" maids could have shared; the groom if he could not have arrived in a timely manner could have, at least, had compassion on those attempting to honor the celebration with lit lamps. Rather than take Paul's advice to "encourage one another," every character in this story misses an opportunity for relationship. Rather than obsessing about the oil, what if their obsession had been over how to insure everyone's presence in a circle of joy at the wedding feast?

Now it would be an oversight on my part if I did not point out the definite criticism contained in the parable that is directed at the days' religious authorities. They are consumed by their thoughts of how to keep the faith pure and the temple beautiful, not to mention profitable. It is such a distraction that they fail not only in connecting their worshipers to God and to one another, they fail to recognize the prophetic arrival of the Messiah in Jesus. To them, instead, Jesus is a nuisance to be dealt with rather than a source of joy. This interpretation gives us warning as well. Rather than being tasked with preserving religion, we are called to communicate faith's joy. We are not to keep the church and its mission as it has always been, rather, we are to create such vibrancy in the church, through change and reformation, that it is a source for oil – for joy – as we relate to one another.

The oil that concerns the bridesmaids is only the oil that they bring. Not one word is spoken about their motives or extenuating circumstances or why some bring extra oil in flasks and some do not. The amount of oil they might have at home or in storage or in the fields yet to be tapped is irrelevant. The story is only one snapshot to help us consider how much oil each one needs to carry on their person. It is a reminder to us about how much oil we carry

in and on our bodies, in our hearts and souls, at any given time or place. (Anna Carter Florence, "Filling Stations," day1.org, 11-4-07) Because a Christian without any oil cannot be the light of the world, what do we do when we find that our oil is all used up?

## ***Rather than being tasked with preserving religion, we are called to communicate faith's joy.***

Where do we replenish our supply of oil?

The cause and effect of it is fairly simple to understand. When the arrow on the gas tank points to empty, we are going to run out of gas. When the two year old doesn't get a nap, she is going to crash. When the only conversation we have with our loved one in three weeks is about getting the car repaired, or we have worked 70 hour weeks for longer than we can count, relationships are going to suffer. (Florence) The oil will run out.

The sticking point is that there are some reserves that no one else can build up for us. There is some oil that can't be borrowed from anyone else. We can't borrow peace of mind. We can't borrow passion for God. We can't say to a friend, "You have a happy marriage, let me borrow some of that." It just doesn't work that way. There is some oil that we have to work for ourselves. We have to figure out what fills us up, what speaks to our spirits, what feeds faith so that we can make sure whenever we leave the house, we have some oil to carry with us. (Florence)

Maybe you become most aware when the hour gets late, and everyone gets sleepy. In our dozing, we make promises to ourselves like, "One of these days, I'll quit working so hard. One of these days, I'll coach my child's team. One of these days, I'll be room mother. One of these days, I'll exercise. One

## ***Because a Christian without any oil cannot be the light of the world, what do we do when we find that our oil is all used up? Where do we replenish our supply of oil?***

of these days, I'll spend the night with Family Promise or I'll teach Sunday School or I'll return to sing in the choir. One of these days, I'll pledge to the church." We doze. We miss the joy because we put it off. And then the shout goes up: "The groom is coming!" It's time and we never got

around to filling our flasks of oil much less packed them for the wedding. (Florence)

That's what is so hard for me to hear in this parable: It is my personal responsibility to keep my flask full and ready. It isn't going to come from a retirement plan. It isn't going to come from good intentions or long range plans. I can't beg, steal or borrow it. Oil is going to come from the ways I keep myself in touch with the joy of knowing Jesus. It comes from recognizing God in the normal events of every day. And just how does this happen?

For me, it happens in a variety of ways. I can give you those self-care answers or I can give you what you might expect from a preacher: Jesus, God, the Bible. For the most part, however, my being connected to Baptist Church of the Covenant is what feeds me. The privilege of serving alongside you is inspiring and personally rewarding. When I think that I am about out of oil, I witness some leap of faith, an answered prayer or the healing that comes after remarkable hurt. Sometimes it is an unexpected act of kindness or a commitment to ministry, and I find that my flask has been filled...not too early, not too late, but right on time.

When the Southern Research lot became available for sale, I began an uncomfortable negotiation with the

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representing real estate agent. While I am not normally unclear in communication, he never seemed able to hear and repeat the same numbers that my notes clearly held. So when we finally got around to closing the deal, I was anxious to be done with him. I told him in September that we would be ready for a closing date of October 31. I was not anticipating any difficulty with our securing a loan as, historically, we have paid our notes off early, and with this purchase, in particular, we had guaranteed rental income with which to make our payments. Surely our existing bank would jump at the chance to take on such a credit risk.

But they turned us down. They flat out turned us down. We were only five days from closing, and we were without financial backing. The Finance Committee scrambled. There were three loan applications made immediately at three different banks, but closing would be delayed. When I came down for Wednesday night supper, my head was spinning. Apparently, I was not the only one for in the course of conversation around the table, one of the trustees shared the dilemma with which we were faced.

When I got home that night, the phone was ringing. The caller, after verifying our dilemma, said, "I might can be of help. It just so happens that the timing of this need finds us in a position to have the funds available that the church requires." We talked over the conditions, including a 4.75% interest rate that a bank had offered. The member said, "I think this will work, but I will know more in the morning. Let's talk then." I held my breath all night.

True to their word, on Thursday morning, the call came. "I'd like to make a 15 year loan to the church for \$125,000 at 3.5% interest. I will transfer the money on Monday for a closing on Tuesday, October 31." Right on time; not too

early, not too late, a member, nudged by Spirit, showed up right on time.

It seems to me that this is often how stewardship works around here. Some give a little, some a little more; but all give according to how Spirit moves in their lives to create generous hands and hearts. The monthly finance reports reflect that we are rarely ahead. We often lag ever-so-slightly behind so that when gifts are given, they are not too early, they are not too late, they come right on time. Right on time in their generosity to keep the lamps burning brightly so that our joy is easy to see and share.

Pledge cards were mailed this week. Pledge cards are also in your bulletin. Will you please alert us to your giving plans this year so that we will be wise maidens, right on time with our burning lamps for the groomsman's return? I will be placing my pledge card in the basket on the communion table. I hope that you will join me there.