
Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour

"Checked Your Oil Lately?"

If you follow the liturgical cycle, then you know we're headed down the home stretch of this Christian year. The New Year of the Christian faith begins on the first Sunday of Advent which, this year, falls on November 29th. The Gospel lessons for these last three Sundays focus on the end of time and the Second Coming of Christ.

The Second Coming anticipates Christ's return in final victory, at which time each of us will be called to stand before the judgment throne, to account for our deeds. This is what John prophesied in The Book of Revelation:

"The seventh angel sounded, and great voices in heaven followed, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ. He will reign forever and ever!'...I saw a great white throne, and him who sat on it... Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works." (Revelation 11:15; 20:11-12)

With that in mind, let's take a closer look at the Gospel lesson for today. It's commonly called, The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens, and it has to do with the activities leading up to a typical Jewish wedding in Jesus' day.

In his Daily Bible Study Series, William Barclay says that Palestinian weddings were occasions for great festivity. Everyone turned out. There was a lot of pageantry and tradition. The celebration went on for days. Among the rituals was a quaint little game played by the bridegroom on the bride.

On the day of the wedding, she would wait for the bridegroom at a designated place, usually at the home of her parents. She'd be accompanied by a host of maidens. Just before the bridegroom arrived, a herald would walk down the street calling out, "Behold,

the bridegroom is coming!" When the bridesmaids heard the announcement, they'd rush out to greet the bridegroom, then the bride would appear and join her husband-to-be and they'd process to where the wedding was to take place.

The trick was no one knew precisely when the bridegroom would arrive. And that was the point: He might come early in the morning or sometime during the day, or he might get there in the middle of the night. The fun was to catch the bridal party off-guard.

Since the bridesmaids had no idea when the bridegroom would come, they had to be ready, on a moment's notice, to do their part. To further complicate matters, no one was allowed on the streets after dark without a lamp. Finally, once the bride and groom had entered the hall where the wedding was to take place, the door was bolted. Latecomers were not allowed. (Barclay: The Gospel of Matthew, vol. 2, Daily Bible Study Series, pp. 319-321)

This sets the stage for the drama of the parable. When the herald came down the street announcing the arrival of the bridegroom, the bridesmaids were understandably asleep. It was midnight, for heaven's sake. They rose quickly and lit their lamps

and rushed out to greet the bridegroom. The wise maidens had the forethought to plan ahead. They brought an extra flask of oil to refill their lamps, as needed. The foolish maidens didn't. They had no reserve. So, when their lamps began to flicker, they had to leave their posts and go look for more. When they got back, the wedding had started, and they were left out in the cold.

It's this extra reserve of oil I'd like for us to think about in the sermon this morning. It raises the question: What can we do, day by day, to prepare for the unexpected? What can we do to be ready, on a moment's notice, to handle a crisis? What can we do to prepare ourselves for the tough times when our faith is put to the test?

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED. That's the first point. If life is anything, it's unpredictable. Just when you think you've got everything under control and you can kick back and take it easy, something unexpected happens - a crisis occurs, and your life is thrown into a tailspin.

Take 9/11, for example. Remember the day? We were into the ninth month of a new Presidency. Things were going pretty well. The Dow Jones Industrial Average was hovering above 10,000.

Our country was at peace, relatively speaking. The Broncos were one-and-one, with high hopes for a winning season and a bid for the playoffs.

Where were you on the morning of September 11, 2001? I had just dropped the kids at school and was on the way to the church, and, I was listening to the morning radio show when they interrupted the regular programming to report that an airplane had hit the north tower of the World Trade Center. I zipped home and was stunned to see black smoke billowing from near the top of the North Tower. Then I gasped as, right before my very eyes, a second plane hit the South Tower. Reports started coming in of a crash at the Pentagon and another in rural Pennsylvania.

Just like that, our nation was under attack. We held our breaths and wondered what more bad news might be in the offing. Thankfully, that was it. Yet, the fallout continues to this day. We're still at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. We're subjected to more and more screening and security checks. The term, "homeland security," has become a fixture in our vocabulary.

Expect the unexpected. Tragedy strikes like a thief in the night. That's the first point, and the second is: Be prepared.

STAY IN SHAPE. Train for the day when the next crisis will occur. Police officers and fire fighters and EMTs exercise to stay physically fit. They practice drills and procedures to keep mentally alert. No matter how quiet things may be at the moment, they know there'll come a day when the alarm will sound and their strengths and skills will be on the line.

In much the same way, the parable would have us keep spiritually fit so that, when the day comes and our faith is tested, we'll be ready and able to respond with strength and confidence.

The sad truth is, when the moment of crisis does come, it's too late to start making preparations. We see this in the parable: When their oil ran out, the foolish maidens rushed over to the others and begged for some of their oil. They said,

"Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'What if there isn't enough for us and you? You go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.'" (Matthew 25:8)

On the surface, that sounds so cruel. Why wouldn't the wise maidens share their oil with the others? The answer is the parable speaks metaphorically. Oil here is a symbol for a life of faith and a healthy relationship with God. And, as we all know, a life of faith and a healthy relationship with God take time and effort and discipline. If you don't have it when the moment comes, it's too late, at least for the crisis of that moment.

We're in the middle of football season. Think about how football practice started back in the summer. Any of you remember "two-a-days?" But college and professional players don't just start in the summer, they jog and lift weights all year long. Then when the team comes together, they go over their plays, time after time, to make sure everyone knows his assignment. They don't just walk out there on game day and suit up. They prepare.

In the performing arts, musicians rehearse and practice their individual parts for hours on end preparing for a concert. Just ask our organists and choir members as they prepare and play for services. It's a demanding work, and it takes a lot of strength and stamina. They are often practicing for weeks. If they waited until the day of the service, they'd fall on their faces.

Well, if this is true of athletes and musicians - and these are just two examples - we shouldn't be surprised when those who've neglected their faith find themselves hopelessly lost when tragedy strikes. They're not prepared. And what's sad is that, in the wake of a crisis, there's not much more anyone else can do but offer sympathy and support. Developing strong faith takes time.

It also takes individual effort. You may be inspired by the faith of others, but that can never substitute for a faith of your own. It's up to you to cultivate your own relationship with God. Some put it this way: "God has many children, but no grandchildren." In other words, you can sing, "Faith of Our Fathers," until you're blue in the face, but when it comes to dealing with the crises of everyday life, it's up to you to stand on your own two feet.

So, when the lamps began to flicker, the foolish maidens cried, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps have gone out." We have no faith to draw from, in other words. And, in the moment of their despair, the wise maidens answered truthfully: There's no way we can help you now.

Expect the unexpected and be prepared. That's what this parable is all about.

The question is, how? What can we do to develop a life of faith and a healthy relationship with God now, while we have time? I'd like to offer two suggestions.

First, LEARN TO PRAY. Just as communication is the foundation of any healthy relationship, so is communication with God the foundation of a life of faith.

Can you imagine being friends with someone you never spoke to? Conversation is the heart of friendship. The same is true of our relationship with God. What I hear God saying to us is, "Speak to me, for heaven's sake. Say hello. Tell me what's on your mind. Tell me about your day. Share with me your innermost thoughts and feelings. Ask me questions. Take me to task. I won't be offended. Say anything, just don't shut me out."

When we talk about prayer, we often make it too formal and complex. We analyze and scrutinize and characterize and list all the different types of prayers we can think of. We bow our heads and close our eyes and screw up our courage and say, in the deepest voice possible, "Dear Gawd ..."

Do you hear what I'm saying? We make it too complicated, too contrived.

Think of prayer simply as conversation with God. You don't have to use proper grammar. You don't have to have all of your thoughts clearly organized. It doesn't have to be long and drawn out. In fact, I'm pretty sure God would appreciate it if your prayers were not long and drawn out! The best prayers are short and simple. All you have to do is acknowledge the unseen Presence of God and be yourself.

Years ago, I called on a retired minister just before the morning worship service to offer the Pastoral Prayer. It caught him off-guard. "You want me to offer the Pastoral Prayer this morning?" he said. He was the type of minister who would normally spend as much time on the wording of the Pastoral Prayer as the sermon. I apologized and said, "If you'd rather not, it's O.K. I'll give you a rain check." He smiled and said, "No, that's all right. I'll offer the prayer. The Lord and I are on good speaking terms."

When it comes to dealing with the unexpected calamities of life, I can't think of anything more important than to be on good speaking terms with the Lord. And so, learn to pray. Make it

your practice to converse with God not just once or twice, but throughout the day.

And second, GET TO KNOW GOD'S WORD IN SCRIPTURE.

Next to prayer, I don't know of a greater resource than to be able to recall passages from the Bible on a moment's notice. For example, I think of verses like:

"The Lord is my shepherd: I shall lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." (Psalm 23:1-2)

- "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)
- "The eternal God is your dwelling place. Underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deuteronomy 33:27)
- "Don't let your heart be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many homes." (John 14:1)
- "For we know that if the earthly house of our tent is dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens." (2 Corinthians 5:1)

- "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will still live, even if he dies." (John 11:25)
- "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

In a moment of crisis, Scripture is a source of great comfort and assurance. It gives us stability and confidence in the midst of the storm. It grounds us in a faith deeper than ourselves and puts us in the company of those who, through the ages, have turned to God as the source of their strength and salvation.

There are lots of ways to cultivate a life of faith and develop a healthy relationship with God, but I can't think of any better than these: Pray without ceasing and get to know God's Word. Do this and your lamp of faith will burn brightly throughout the darkest hour.

Here's the bottom line: Expect the unexpected and be prepared.
Checked your oil lately?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

