

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 9, 2014
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 5:18-24
Psalm 70
I Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

As the Christian year draws to a close, the Scripture lessons in these weeks turn our attention to a consideration of “last things,” or what theologians call *eschatology*.

But even texts that focus on the “end” of things have a practical dimension to them, and our texts for today are no different in that respect. To put it bluntly, biblical texts usually *scratch* an *itch* of some kind.

In the case of our epistle and Gospel lessons for today, the “itch” can be readily identified. The question on the hearts of believers in Thessalonica and on the minds of those to whom Matthew wrote his Gospel, is this: *What do we do when Christ doesn't return as soon as we thought he would?*

There is abundant evidence in the New Testament to lead us to believe that many Christians in the early church believed that Christ would return during their lifetime. They believed that they would personally witness the Lord's return, and that they would join with Christ in the punishment of God's enemies and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

This was especially the case for the church at Thessalonica. I Thessalonians is perhaps the earliest New Testament document written, dating at around A.D. 50, perhaps even earlier.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the expectation was that Jesus' second coming was imminent. But as time passed, believers began to die and Christ had not yet returned. And so the Thessalonian believers reasoned like this: if a person responds to the Gospel and becomes a Christian, that person will be delivered from God's wrath and will share in Christ's reign when he returns. But if that person dies before Christ returns, does he/she miss out on this promise?

And with great pastoral sensitivity, the apostle Paul answers their question. He tells the Thessalonian Christians that those who die in Christ will not miss out, but will actively participate in the wonderful events of Jesus' return. They won't find themselves in some sort of "Rip Van Winkle" state, where they wake up one day to find out they have missed out on the party.

No, Paul says. When Christ returns, those who have died will be raised from their graves and gathered together with those who are still living, and together they will share in the reign of Christ.

As with Paul's crowd, Matthew's crowd also faces the question, "what do we do when Jesus has not returned as quickly as we thought he would?"

One lens through which we look to get an answer to that question is this parable we know as the parable of the bridesmaids, or parable of the ten virgins.

This parable has always been a hard one for me, and maybe one reason is because of my ignorance of how weddings worked in the first century. From what I can gather, a common pattern in that day and age was that when the time of the wedding drew near, the groom would set out and travel to the house of the bride, who was waiting there with her bridesmaids.

Once the groom arrived at the bride's house, he and the bride and the bridesmaids would all set out in procession and travel back to the groom's house where the rest of the ceremony took place.

But in the ancient near East, the observance of time was not always what we know it to be today. Today, if we receive an invitation to a wedding and the invitation says that the time of the wedding is Saturday at 4:00 o'clock, we show up on Saturday at 3:45 expecting a wedding at 4:00 o'clock.

But it wasn't like this in the first century. Bridegrooms were busy, working people. They were often delayed. The invitation may have said Saturday at 4:00 o'clock, but the reality was that the wedding started *when the groom got there*. It may have been Saturday at 4:00 o'clock, or it may have been sometime Saturday evening, or it may have been sometime Sunday. The ceremony started whenever the groom got there, and no one knew precisely *when* that would be.

The Bridesmaids, then, had an important function in addition to that of being beautiful friends of the bride who joined her at her wedding. Bridesmaids came with torches, so that in the event that the groom was delayed, their torches would light the way in the darkness as the wedding party made its way back to the house of the groom.

This may be what is in view when Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like the story of ten bridesmaids who went to meet the bridegroom. Presumably, they take their torches and go to the bride's house to wait for the groom. As sometimes happens, the groom is delayed, and so they all go to sleep, presumably inside the bride's house. Some of the bridesmaids, anticipating that the groom may not arrive on time, take along extra oil for their lamps. Others take only what is in their lamps.

Sure enough, at midnight someone shouts, "Wake up, everyone -- he's coming! It's time to go!"

At that point, some of the bridesmaids simply don't have enough oil for the rest of the journey. The wait has been longer than they expected or planned for, and now everything has changed.

Now, it would take several sermons to unpack this parable and explore its complexities. But in the larger context of Matthew's gospel, there is also a profound simplicity to this text. This is the third in a series of parables that are

concerned with *watchfulness*. Faced with the delay of Jesus' return, it speaks forth the importance of *watching* and *waiting*. In that sense, it brings us full circle from where we began the sermon this morning.

But I don't want to insult your intelligence this morning by simply repeating what we already know to be true. We know that it's been a long time between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. And when faced with the question of what we do when Jesus hasn't returned as soon as we thought he would, the obvious answer is: *we wait*.

But I want to go out on a limb this morning and suggest to you that waiting is not the issue. ***How we wait*** is the issue. And something in our text this morning set me to thinking about *how* we might be called to wait for Jesus' return.

In verses 11-12 as Jesus concludes the parable, the bridesmaids are calling out to be admitted to the marriage feast, and Jesus says, "I don't know you."

Do you hear an echo there? Does this remind you of anything?

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, in the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus says:

Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as "Lord," but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. On judgment day many will tell me, "Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name." But I will reply, "I never knew you..." [Mt. 7:21ff.]

This explicit echo from the *Sermon on the Mount* that surfaces here in our parable this morning suggests to me that watchfulness and being prepared for Jesus' return does *not* involve surveying the horizon of history for signs of his coming. Instead, waiting on Jesus involves *doing what Jesus did*. In the words of the prophet Amos, "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

It may seem strange for me to say this, but the best way for us to watch for Jesus' return is not to watch at all! The best way for us to watch for his return is for us to be about the business of pouring our lives into the needs of other people.

This is precisely the Message of Amos in the Old Testament lesson for today. Among other things, Amos is sharply critical of liturgy and worship that becomes disconnected from how people live their daily lives. More precisely, Amos is concerned with how the faith community deals with those who are vulnerable, marginalized, and less fortunate.

I want to make it clear that neither the Bible nor the prophets generally prescribe any specific social plan or economic system. This is why you may have heard it said here at Epworth that we "don't do politics." By that we mean that we don't officially endorse any singular political or economic strategy as being uniquely Christian.

But I should be even more clear on this point: To say that we do not endorse any one political or economic strategy is NOT to say that we are free to do nothing. It is to say that whatever strategy or strategies we pursue, we will be judged by this criterion: *how well are the vulnerable and less fortunate members of our society being cared for?*

So again, we've come full circle. What do we do when Jesus hasn't returned as soon as we thought he would?

The answer: we watch, and we wait. But our watching and waiting is done more with our *hands* than with our *eyes*. It is done through a commitment to loving *deeds*, rather than calculating unknown *days*.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us remember that these symbols of bread and wine are Christ's ongoing pledge to us that he indeed will return again. Let us embrace these tokens with faith, and let us resolve that *when* he returns again he will find us watching and waiting by *doing what he did, and loving as he loved*.

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