

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
November 12, 2017  
Twenty-third 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.

There is abundant evidence in the New Testament 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.

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.

According to the custom of Jesus' day, a bride was first "betrothed" to her husband, but continued for a time to live with her family. Then, at the appointed hour some months later, the groom would come to claim her, leading her family and bridal party to the wedding feast that would celebrate and inaugurate their new life together.

(It was during this "betrothal" stage that the angel came to Joseph and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife...)

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 arrived in the evening, their torches would light the way in the darkness as the wedding party made its way back to the groom's house.

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.

In the parable's symbolism, Jesus is the Bridegroom (see Mark 2:19). As such, he fulfills God's ancient promise to join Himself forever to His chosen people as a husband cleaves to a bride (see Hosea 2:16-20).

The virgins of the bridal party represent us, the members of the Church. We were "betrothed" to Jesus in baptism (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27), and are called to

live lives of holiness and devotion until he comes again to lead us to the heavenly wedding feast at the end of time (Rev. 19:7-9; 21:1-4).

In light of this, we need to keep vigil through the dark night of this time in which our Bridegroom seems long delayed.

Now 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 in this parable 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, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.