

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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Perhaps today's story hits a little too close to home. After all, I think we've all been a part of a group that had to wait and wait and wait. Waiting with anxiety. Waiting throughout the night. Waiting for a little sign. Waiting for the celebration. Waiting. Has anyone had that experience? No? Come on, a yes/no in the chat-anyone?

Well, our experiences are not a strict copy of today's parable. After all, these bridesmaids were tasked with being ready to welcome the bridegroom and celebrate with him. For us, we've been waiting for a lot of things—for election results, for a vaccine, and for the time when we can gather for worship. So, too, those who first hear Matthew's gospel were waiting—waiting for Jesus to come again and things were getting, well, a little frustrating. After all, the first generation of Jesus' believers were certain that Jesus would come in their lifetime. And 50 years later when Matthew was written, they were still waiting and it was growing harder and harder to sustain their readiness.

And, I know that feeling all too well, and maybe you do too. At the beginning of this pandemic, it was easier to follow the best practices of distancing, staying home, and avoiding gatherings. Now, it sometimes feels unbearable. It feels like a vaccine and its accompanying normalcy will *never* arrive. So too as we watched the slow counting of votes it began to get exhausting, because we wanted to know the outcome. And whether it's the pandemic, election results, finding a life partner, conceiving a child, receiving test

results, hearing about a job, or so many other things, we, as a people, are often impatient. We get tired. And, sometimes, we give up.

But the thing that is true about God in this parable is that God *always* shows up, even when we think it won't happen. And, often in ways, places, and times that we least expect. But, nevertheless, God always comes to us just like the bridegroom arrived in this parable. And, one thing that this parable teaches us is how to wait, and that's where the lamps come into play.

You see, the lamps in Jesus's time used olive oil because it was a clean-burning, renewable, and abundant source of fuel. Some lamps were an open bowl while others were a partially close reservoir, but both worked in the same way. They required a relatively shallow reservoir for the oil because of the viscosity of the oil and the ability of the wick to move that oil towards the flame. Because of this, the lamps only burned a handful of hours. But, to maximize the burn time proper care for the wick was important. Just like our Sanctuary candles, if the wick is too short, the flame will give off very little light. If the wick is too long, you'll get a much larger flame that flickers, expels carbons, and quickly uses its fuel. But, a properly sized wick extends the burn time and gives useful light.¹ So, why does that matter?

Well, this parable illuminates the truths of the Advent season. The truth that this work that you and I, we, are called to in our baptism— that is to strive for justice, peace, understanding, and love— that work is **not** a sprint and it does

¹ https://mail-attachment.googleusercontent.com/attachment/u/0/?ui=2&ik=1bbd5a8ef5&attid=0.1.1&permmsgid=msg:f:1682623248198266069&th=1759e0ede7abecd5&view=att&disp=inline&sadbat=ANGjdj8udftLFFG08pCddxCM8coGfmGafB3G9GNps1VdcGU67C4uxz1_22K-OzFi3h8ohO7gdUJrcWdZw9j-amP85wifBLORHdu3hPmjLx0mfMp6WExoPujLlWR0zS5XUSVDSYnNL57qG1cAyOqu7bJUHyv0Q_vy4raw8pArX6v90CihCLecAsp6pHc-C6M8codMNIqMmuseXsvUKEZm-Fy-RicAebnwXXnRB0sYBbyIZuCEyK7Xj4HD_Qz_GsIKj29ov8Uzkep6w2vXDg71Ze4L03nwlrPYVaAKJdHBJ1vZ6iCo3Ew_sTTh54apudegWVXNLCTVikwBfdG4P95E7rR88NzTnFwmw1v2K-XaGmZWfu3KD3Dqq-4QMntIOXyde-Xk2-gfYcspy18YACmUyC2bRH6T5qzYhm5f5c4le7V1KRFBtNep6cA2o-aqmPjC9tKGmwBxbegrNnHys0Q3RIIue2AXr_yiEo8aa06NjO_AkhZiGS2qzX-MMIpVW-FPrNo1ZI_69HQsnknXPcPyUBuW-18G0qT9kg1CsShzxwrvEI8uQJ985-kZ3pR5P08fnHzoD3y4rkf1w7VenPPTok_72otsTEmNheE9X9TTPzIqsWY2_v0mAspVwiGv_nKG4UmhgbvB9HYWI2uarRpa6zkd0r2dEybmPyBCZah_81i17zMnPatY

not come easily. This baptismal life is a marathon—a marathon that can feel never-ending. So, in this life-long marathon, we need to BOTH prepare with extra oil but also watch how we're burning our oil. If we burn our energy too fast, we'll burn out and miss the whole thing. If we use our energy too slowly, then we'll lose our way and get nowhere. Does that make sense?

Friends, the rolling justice that prophet Amos mentioned is hard. It often feels dreary, exhausting, endless, and overwhelming. Responding to discrimination is not enticing. Caring for those on the margins is not flashy. And, compassion fatigue and burnout are too real. Partnering with God to bring about God's vision is meant to be a steady burn. A burning flame that will require us to top off with some stored oil from our faithful siblings, from the Scriptures, and from the holy food at Christ's table. This burning flame that will require us to set our wick, and thus, our burn rate, just right. And, with those actions, then by that flame we get glimpses of God's presence in unexpected places. With that flame, we see progress against racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The flame shines and illuminates the truth. The flame is thrown into the corner and we see God's face in a prisoner, an orphan, or the one with whom we disagree.

And, while the journey towards God's vision is long, I'm sure you want this sermon to be short, so I'll leave us here. Waiting is hard, and the journey is long. But, our God is always present, and we have full assurance that God's vision for complete justice, peace, and love will come. And, while it can feel like it might never arrive, it often comes when we least expect it. So, the parable reminds us to keep the lamps burning by minding the wick and using the reserves of oil. For, in our baptisms, we were given a bottomless oil

reserve in that cross-shaped smear of olive oil placed on your head. That is but one gift of oil from our God that never runs dry, and in God, that is the strength that will keep the flame of God's vision alive. Amen.