

Let Your Light Shine
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church
Pastor Ben Heimach-Snipes

Joshua 24:1-3 and 14-18

Matthew 25:1-13

This Wednesday evening, hundreds of local residents crowded into the basement of St. Barnabas Catholic Church to hear from local law enforcement and elected officials hosted by the Beverly Area Planning Association and other local groups. Fear bubbled up in our community this week as it became public that several armed robberies occurred in the neighborhood over the last month. A few church members and I attended this meeting to stay in touch with the life of the community.

When I arrived to the packed assembly, an African American woman stood up to demand more information from the police who had described the suspects in the robberies as Black teenage boys. She knew that our neighborhood is home to thousands of young men who match this limited description, and she voiced her concern that this kind of race based reporting makes these men - our children - potential suspects. Their neighbors may treat them like suspects just for being in the neighborhood. She hoped to combat this racial profiling by having more robust descriptions of the perpetrators.

While there were some limited identifiers described beyond race and gender, community members responded to this concern by affirming again and again the importance of being nosy neighbors. If we know all the families and teenagers on our block, then we can respond to them out of relationship rather than out of fear or suspicion.

If we know our neighbors, we can also find refuge in them if we experience this kind of terrifying crime. If we make a habit of knowing our neighbors, we also provide opportunities for community and real relationship that we often miss with those around us.

Jesus describes his own understanding of vigilance in his parable lesson today. He says, "Therefore, keep alert, because you don't know the day or the hour."

What is the context in which our savior makes such a demand? The triumphant entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday has come and gone. Jesus was questioned by the religious authorities who built a case against him as a threat to their power, and Jesus left Jerusalem - left his teaching in temple - never to return again. We find Jesus today on the Mount of Olives, teaching privately to his disciples to prepare them for his death, his resurrection and his return to bring the kingdom of God to completion on earth.

"Therefore, keep alert, because you don't know the day or the hour." The parables in these vulnerable moments before Jesus' arrest have been used in many contexts to condemn some and glorify others.

In this parable, Jesus identifies five wise bridesmaids who came prepared to wait for the bridegroom with extra oil for their lamps while five foolish bridesmaids came with only their lamps - believing their guest would arrive right away. When their guest ended up being late, it was only the five wise bridesmaids who had enough oil to welcome in the bridegroom and enter the wedding banquet.

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Somehow there was enough demand for lamp oil that there was a shop open at midnight for the foolish to buy more oil - surely at a marked up price! When they return to the gate to join the wedding party, they plead with the Lord to be let in, but he replied, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you."

"I don't know you." A phrase that will come up again and again over these last weeks before the new liturgical year begins with Advent. "I don't know you." Is what Jesus' parable characters say to those who don't care for the sick and vulnerable or welcome the stranger - those who lack in good deeds.

In fact, Jewish scholars believe there is a literary connection that equates the use of oil with good deeds. So perhaps literally, the wise bridesmaids come prepared with a long supply of good deeds, while the foolish exhaust their good deeds in their first moments of expectation of Jesus' coming.

In Matthew's time, there was an expectation that Jesus would return soon - within the lifetime of Jesus' disciples - so that they would see the completion of God's kingdom on Earth. When that return continued to be delayed, many grew weary and questioned if Jesus was coming at all. Some scholars believe that this parable is used by the writer of Matthew to encourage believers to keep the faith. Two thousand years later, we have a different perspective of what waiting for Christ can be. The wise bridesmaids would need much more than an extra container of oil to make it these many years.

We still wait for Christ. We still wait for the completion of God's kingdom on earth - for sin to be defeated once and for all. We hope - which literally means we wait - for Christ's return.

So in this time of waiting, Jesus' parable might still provide for us the same message as it did for those disciples that waited with Jesus on the Mount of Olives. We are not called to wait in isolation, as if our baptism into God's grace is the end of our journey of faith. Our baptism is the beginning - it is our communal connection to the grace of God - already present with us. Our baptism is a moment of celebration of this gift of grace, but Jesus claims in this parable that with this gift comes responsibility. There is time and room to live now to embody the kingdom of God in the world.

Jesus calls on us to live for the moment now, always being prepared for a future with God - always seeking a future for God's kingdom here on earth.

In our Hebrew Bible text today, Joshua demands that the Israelites make a choice in that moment to follow the gods of their ancestors or remain faithful to the covenanting God of Abraham who delivered them from Egypt. He unites them in that moment and exclaims, "put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord."

We too, need reminders to put away the gods of our ancestors and the gods of this land - that of greed and ego, security and fear. If we are to serve the Lord our God, we must keep these influences out of our lives and focus on the love of God.

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God delivers grace to us which we can experience now in freedom from our life of sin. We are free from sin so that we might transform the world as the body of Christ. Jesus calls us to remain vigilant, to respond to God's grace by sharing God's love at all times.

What could that mean for us as a part of the Beverly Morgan Park community? As our neighborhood responds to the trauma and anxiety of armed robberies, we are called to remain committed to our God of love and grace. We are called to prepare full flasks of oil - lives of faith in which we nurture community and empower new life.

We can respond out of the wisdom of our community that called for us to know our neighbors. Not metaphorically, but actually know them. Say hello to strangers we meet. Invite our neighbors into our homes. Ask questions of care and concern, so that we might come to know each other, to care for each other, to find peace in each other's company.

The world is full of the gods of greed and fear that bubble up in our politics and our personal decisions. Let us recommit this day to our God! Our God that frees the slaves, liberates the oppressed, and brings peace to the nations!

The grace of God is available to us today to be renewed - to refill our oil flasks for another night in darkness, waiting for the return of our saviour. Let us be renewed so that the light of Jesus might shine bright again this day.

Amen.