

Get Me to the Church on Time
Sermon on Matthew 25:1-13 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, November 6, 2005

“The gentle sex was made for man to marry, to share his nest and see his food is cooked, but, with a little bit o’ luck, You can have it all and not get hooked!” That is the philosophy of Alfred P. Doolittle, the carousing and conniving father of Eliza Doolittle in Lerner and Loewe’s *My Fair Lady*. Perhaps the unlikeliest of men ever to settle down, by the show’s end, Alfie is going to get married. But it is clear that he isn’t going to the altar without one last hurrah. He is a man aware of his weaknesses but resolved to go ahead with his wedding. Alfie’s determination is clear: Kick up a rumpus, But don’t lose the compass; Some bloke who’s able, Lift up the table; but get me to the church on time. If I am flyin’, Then shoot me down. If I am wooin’, Get her out of town! Drug me or jail me, Stamp me and mail me. Feather and tar me; Call out the Army; But get me to the church. Get me to the church. Be sure and get me to the church on time!

If only the five foolish bridesmaids had shown similar resolve, their story, like *My Fair Lady*, might have had a happy ending. Instead, their lack of preparation resulted in their being shut out of the wedding festivities. Their fate stands as a warning to us all to be prepared for the coming kingdom of God.

This parable of the bridesmaids is but one in a series of cautionary tales in which Jesus tells his followers about the coming of the Son of Man. The coming of the Son of Man referred to the end of the age, that time when God would judge the earth and bring his promised kingdom to fulfillment. These final days would be marked by strange occurrences and would involve situations of trials and tests. According to Jesus, there will be “wars and rumors of wars;...For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Mt. 24:6-7).

Despite the attempts of many to say exactly when these events will happen, Jesus says, “[A]bout that day and that hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (24:36).

What, then, is to be done in the face of the imminent coming of God’s kingdom? Jesus warns, “Keep awake . . . for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming,” and “[Y]ou also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (24:42, 44). Jesus’ message to us is clear: Wait. Watch. Be prepared. Get ready.

Perhaps it is human nature to resist such warnings, to discount them as fear-mongering. We know by heart the story of Chicken Little, who claimed the sky is falling. (And if we don’t know the story, starting this weekend we can see it in 3-D at a local Cineplex.) We make fun of the color-coded terror alerts. We remain in our beachfront homes despite hurricane forecasts and evacuation orders. We continue to build expensive homes in floodplains and fault lines. And then when the sky falls, the terrorists strike, the hurricanes hit, and the floods and earthquakes happen, we wonder why: why people were killed, why homes and lives were destroyed, why there weren’t any warnings.

Friends, this story is just such a warning, a warning of what the scripture promises and the church professes: Jesus will come again to fulfill the kingdom of God. And you and I are called to be ready. We are called to be ready because as Christians we are citizens of a kingdom that is both now and not yet. God’s kingdom is a kingdom that still waits to be completed. It waits for God’s timing, for God’s good and perfect will to bring it to fulfillment.

And when Jesus speaks of God’s kingdom, he often speaks of it in terms of a wedding banquet. This is not so surprising given that the Old Testament often speaks of God as a husband to Israel, his wife. In Isaiah 54:5, for instance, the prophet reminds Israel that “your

Maker is your husband,' and Hosea 2:16 declares, "in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'my husband.'" In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet that a king gave for his son. In today's passage, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps in order to wait for a bridegroom returning home with his bride. Five of these maidens were foolish, for when they took their lamps, they took no oil with them, while five of them were wise, bringing along with them flasks of extra oil. (Here one wonders if it was extra virgin olive oil they had.)

If things had gone according to plan, everything would have been all right. If the groom had arrived on time, everyone would have been there to greet him, and they all would have waltzed merrily into the banquet hall and enjoyed the wedding festivities. But things did not go according to plan. The bridegroom was delayed. As one who has been there, I can assure you that these things happen. Whatever the reason, the groom was delayed, the hour grew late, and the bridesmaids grew so tired that they all fell sound asleep, lamps ablaze.

At midnight they were awakened with a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Quickly the bridal party got up and prepared their lamps for the candlelight procession, only to discover that they were running out of the oil that fueled them. The five foolish maidens said to their friends, "Give us some of your oil, or our lamps will go out." But the five wise maidens refused them, saying there would not be enough for everyone. You had better go and buy some from the dealers. Good luck finding a shop open at midnight in first century Palestine.

"And while they went to buy [oil], the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut." When the foolish maidens returned from their shopping trip, they found the party in full swing but the door locked. So they pounded

on the door, crying out, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But from the other side of that heavy door came the distinct reply, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ (24:10-12)

It comes as a shocking, indeed a rather rude, ending. God wouldn’t do such an impolite thing as locking out some unfortunate girls just because they had failed to plan ahead would he? As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, ‘The Bible is not simply a book about admirable people or even about a conventionally admirable God.’¹ This story features unadmirably foolish girls. It talks about their being left in the dark-literally and figuratively. And if the Bible isn’t simply about admirable people or a conventionally admirable God, neither is Christianity simply about doing admirable things. The admirable thing to do in this case would be for the wise women to share with their friends, or for the Lord to say, ‘Oh, what the heck. Y’all are nice girls. Come on in.’ But that doesn’t happen. I have nothing to do with you, says the lord.

Sometimes the Bible has to come right out and announce that if we aren’t careful, if we don’t watch out, if we refuse to plan ahead, there will be an unhappy ending.

As the Church, we know that Jesus will return and with him he will bring the glorious fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven. The reign of God will mean that wrongs will be righted, that wounds will be healed, and that wars shall give way to peace. God’s justice shall be established throughout the world, and you and I shall take part in that fearsome judgment. But we have no cause to be afraid if we remain vigilant, if we watch, if we live as a people prepared to face our Maker. We have no cause to be afraid because, like the bridesmaids, Jesus has invited us to be there & told us to expect his coming. We have a place because of his invitation.

‘The bridegroom, like the kingdom of heaven, did not arrive promptly; he was delayed, and some two thousand years later, the kingdom is still delayed.’ And in two thousand years,

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, ‘Tales of Terror, Times of Wonder’ from **The Other Side** Online, © 2000 The Other Side, March-April 2000, Vol. 36, No. 2 at <http://www.theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr00/taylor.html>.

people grow weary and fall asleep. There is nothing wrong with falling asleep, for bodies need rest and life must go on while we wait. The difference lies in what we do while we wait. As Tom Long says, “The wise ones in church,” the ones we celebrate and acknowledge today as the saints of God, “are those who are prepared for the delay; who hold on to the faith deep into the night; who, even though they see no bridegroom coming, still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God.”² Let us, then, live as saints and wise ones, as people prepared, constantly ready, for the coming kingdom of God: serving, hoping, praying, and waiting until the joyous shout goes up, “Jesus the bridegroom is here! Come, let us join him!” Be sure and get me to the Lord on time.

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 281.