

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 5th Sunday after Epiphany, February 8, 2015

Be Prepared

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Matthew 25:1-13

This is Scout Sunday and as you know, I am a Boy Scout leader. In Scouts we stress that you must be prepared for almost anything, be that an injury or sudden storm while Scouts are camping, encounters with nature – animals like snakes or bears, or undesirable plants like stinging nettle or poison ivy. The Scout Motto is “Be Prepared” and when a Scout goes out on an outdoor adventure, he is expected to be prepared by bringing with him whatever he might reasonably expect to need in order to make the outing a success.

The Boy Scout Handbook explains it this way:

“Someone once asked Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting, ‘Be prepared for what?’ ‘Why,’ said Baden-Powell, ‘for any old thing.’ The Scout Motto means that you are always ready in mind and body to do your duty and to face danger, if necessary, to help others.

“The more Scouting skills you have, the better able you are to live up to the motto. When someone has an accident, you are prepared because of your first aid training. Because of lifesaving instruction, you can save a child who has fallen into the water. If a building catches fire, you are ready to help because you have practiced what to do. Proper training prepares you to do your best in the face of an emergency.

“But Baden-Powell was not thinking just of being prepared for accidents. His idea was that every Scout should prepare himself to become a useful citizen and to give happiness to other people. He wanted each Scout to be prepared to work for all the good things that life has to offer and to face with a strong heart whatever may lie ahead.

“Be prepared for life - to live happily and without regret, knowing that you have done your best. That's what the Scout Motto means.”

I hasten to add that while I quoted the Boy Scout Handbook, Lord Baden-Powell was talking about youth of both sexes. His wife Olave, at his urging, founded Girl Guides or Girl Scouts as they are known in the United States. Lord and Lady Baden-Powell considered the motto “Be Prepared” to apply equally to girls as well as boys.

Clearly, had Scouting existed back in Biblical times, the five virgins who did not bring extra oil for their lamps would have benefited greatly from being Scouts and in learning how to be prepared.

Some Bible translations use the term “bridesmaids” or “maidens” instead of virgins. Whichever term is used it emphasizes that the women were not married.

According to the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary it was Jewish custom for the groom to leave his parents’ home with a group of friends and go to the home of the bride where the wedding ceremony would be held.

After the ceremony, the wedding party would go to the home of the groom for a wedding banquet which often was at night after dark. Hence the need for the lamps which the bridesmaids carried. In the Old Testament Yahweh God is described as the “husband” of the people of Israel. In our scripture reading from Matthew, the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the bridegroom is Jesus, the messianic Son of Man and the bride is the Church. But who are the virgins? They are those who are prepared for the second coming of Christ and those who are not prepared. The theological term for the second coming is “the parousia”, a topic which is not a very popular one for sermons in mainline Protestant churches. Why this is the case, I do not know but perhaps it is the complexity of the topic or the difficulty of explaining it.

Our scripture reading is full of awkward things, some of which don’t seem to make much sense. For example, would shops be open late in the evening where the foolish bridesmaids could buy oil? That is rather unlikely at midnight. Similarly the unprepared bridesmaids were foolish in expecting the wiser ones to share lamp oil with them for to do so would mean that all ten of the bridesmaids would run out of oil.

All of the bridesmaids were close friends of the bride and groom. If they weren’t, they would never have been asked to be in the wedding party. The analogy is that all of us have been chosen by Christ to be in his wedding party but some of us are not prepared and thus are unworthy.

When the foolish bridesmaids return from their hopeless hunt for more oil, they find that the banquet has begun and the door to the house is locked. They call out asking for it to be opened so that they may enter but they are rejected as strangers. *“Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.”*

That locked door is allegorically pointing to hell. *“Truly I tell you, I don’t know you”* is *“... a stark, straightforward statement of rejection of a person who does not have a true relationship with Jesus.”* (Zondervan Commentary)

God and Christ, throughout scripture, are said to “know” the chosen people, those who have a saving relationship with God --- those who are prepared.

The wedding banquet was delayed until rather late in the evening, When the Gospels were written, the early Christians expected Christ’s second coming to happen very soon, but it didn’t. It was delayed and we are still awaiting it. Allegorically this is reflected in today’s parable with the late start of the banquet.

When the banquet does start, that is when Christ does return, not everyone will be ready just as half of the maidens were not ready. The parable is one of being prepared in the face of uncertainty.

While Matthew states that this parable was told by Jesus, there has been much argument about that and it is likely that it was a creation of the early church to explain the delay in the second coming.

The story is allegorical, representing Christ as the bridegroom returning to earth to receive his bride, the Church. The story is a clear depiction of the future as indicated by the words, *“The bridegroom was a long time in coming.”* That delay is the key to the story.

But when the Parousia, the end time, comes how many of us will be like the bridesmaids who were prepared and how many will be like those who were not?

“When Jesus calls on his disciples to keep watch, he is calling on them to take the reality of God so seriously that they can come to terms with its sudden appearance at any moment within their own lives, precisely because they know that this reality will one day come unboundedly in the kingdom of God.” (Edward Schweitzer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1975, p. 468)

“Those who do not plan faithfully, and wisely, for the kingdom of God while there is yet time, will not gain entrance when it arrives. There comes a time when it will be too late!” (Robert E. Luccock, Matthew, Abington Press, 1997, p.90)

When the time comes, will you be prepared?

Amen!

(Note: All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible)