

2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 8-12 ~ Matthew 25:1-13

Staying Power

23rd Sunday after Pentecost ~ November 8, 2020

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

As we record this service on Saturday morning, November 6 at 10:00 am, I have a question for you: Are you feeling optimistic or pessimistic about the future? When media theorist Marshall McLuhan was asked that question, he said, "I am not an optimist or a pessimist. I am an apocalyptic."ⁱ Now, in my family my husband Bob would be the first to admit that he has an "apocalyptic imagination," which is to say: whatever minor mishap may occur, it grows instantly larger than life and seems like a major catastrophe in his mind. While I, on the other hand, am famous in my family for being an eternal and sometimes annoying optimist. "It's only a minor flesh wound." But Marshall McLuhan's third option, "I am an apocalyptic," is something else altogether. His stance, is theologically spot on and gets us closer to understanding what Jesus is up to in today's text which is part of a larger section of Matthew 24-25, known as Jesus' "apocalyptic discourse."

So, what does that mean? To be an apocalyptic is actually to take a radically hopeful stance. One that holds up in the dark as well as the light. While the word "apocalypse" may bring into your mind a scene from a Mad Max film, with a dusty street, abandoned hulls of cars, smoldering garbage, boarded up shops and an emaciated cat with a broken tail running for cover, the word "apocalypse" actually means "to unveil" or "to reveal." So, to be an apocalyptic is "to be a person who seeks to strip away the lies we tell ourselves, revealing what is true. And in doing so, an apocalyptic hears the call to change. An apocalyptic, stands on the hope that we "have the God-given capacity to turn our lives away from the lies and back toward that truth."ⁱⁱ

Surely 2020 has been and continues to lurch forward as an apocalyptic year: revealing a country deeply divided politically and economically. A year when the veil of systemic racism has been pulled back for many white people. A year when our interdependence as a global community, forever changed by a virus that began in one place now pervades the entire world. A year where the effect of climate change is seen and felt as never before. Noticing these truths in a new light which our ongoing election continues to reveal, I don't know about you, but I am hearing that call to change. We can do better. We must. And so, perhaps even we Presbyterians who don't usually rush to the apocalyptic portions of our scripture, are ready for our three-week immersion in what I will call Jesus' "Apocalyptic training." We begin today with Matthew 25:1-13.

Sermon:

"What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?" Carmen Lawler, Dan Crump and I will be teaching our ninth-grade confirmation class on Sunday (by Zoom) working on answer this exact question: "'What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?" It means, in part, to be an apocalyptic. And how might we go about that? "If any want to become my disciples," says Jesus, then you are on the team. No one is on the bench. We can't all be Aaron Rodgers or Davante Adams. But we all have an important position on Team Jesus. Whether we know it or not.

The Beatitudes offered us the game plan back in Matthew 5, but today's gospel lesson Matthew 25 issues a warning, a cautionary tale, rather than rules to live by. Week one of our "Apocalyptic Training" comes in the form of a warning by way of Jesus' parable about the ten bridesmaids. Obviously those five bridesmaids whose lamps went out at midnight did something wrong. Things go from bad to very bad for them by the end of this parable. But what was their mistake? What did they do wrong? Is it simply a lesson about planning ahead and being prepared?

As vitally important as good preparation surely is, the heart of this parable offers more to us than the Boy Scout motto. There is a limit to how far being prepared can help us. As we look back on 2020: No one could have been prepared adequately for the coronavirus pandemic. Even this past week: no one could adequately prepare for how this cliffhanger 2020 election is playing out. Nor is simply "being prepared" the answer to fighting back the climate change that will make our earth uninhabitable, if left unchecked. Nor does "being prepared" help our nation dismantle systemic racism that has infected our body politic since Jamestown became a colony in 1619 and began the colonization of what would become our nation. We need a more apocalyptic approach to all of these issues. Thankfully, friends, Jesus' parable delivers.

If you pay attention to the story line of this parable, story plays out, it has rough edges that don't line up with Jesus' own Sermon on the Mount. You are correct if you were surprised about those "wise" bridesmaids that would not share their oil. Jesus definitely preached, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." (Matthew 5:42). Later in the same sermon Jesus said, "Knock and the door will be opened for you, for everyone who asks, receives. (Matthew 7:7-8). Why not this door when the five "foolish" bridesmaids knocked on it? And what happened to "the last shall be first, and the first shall be last?" Not this door. Even the seemingly obvious "good ones" and "bad ones" set up with the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids, may not be as binary as has been popularly interpreted. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom... and God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." As Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 1:25, 27.

This parable is not a review of the sermon on the mount, instead it's rough jarring wakes us up, warns us about, what? Here's what I see: The mistake on which the story turns was *not* that they ran out of oil. We don't know, but I think the bridegroom would have let them in with or without their lamps lit. The light of the other five would have done the job. The mistake was that they left. They did not stay present in the heat of the moment. Why did they leave? When their oil had run out, they believed they had nothing to give, nothing to offer and were no longer worthy to be on the scene when the bridegroom and his fiancé appeared. Their "wise" friends agreed with them: you've got nothing. Go, get some, and come back. Perhaps well intended, but bad advice. That was not God wisdom, that was worldly wisdom.ⁱⁱⁱ

Staying power, to stay as long as it takes. Especially when the waiting gets long and hard. Especially when we think that it's game over. Jesus is telling us do not leave. We can always choose to leave. To give up. To give in. To step out of the light. That is our choice, but it is a bad

one. Even when we feel like we have nothing to give, we do. God will show us what that is. The light within us cannot be extinguished entirely. In fact, as Paul points out to the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians, through the power of the cross, we discover our generosity and generativity most profoundly in the context of ordeal and struggle. Yes, when we are waiting in the darkness.

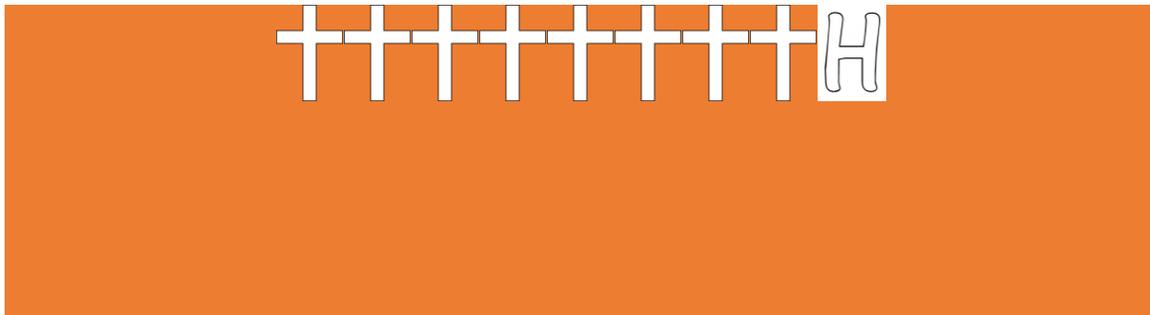
Like the ten bridesmaids, our church or any church is a blessedly diverse and mixed group. From one season to the next, even one day to the next, some of us have the extra oil and some of us do not. Within each one of us is wisdom and foolishness. And God wants and needs it all, to be given for the sake of others. To be given to light the world with God's love. To be given to heal the hurts, to right the wrongs, to do our part to return to the Garden where all of God's creation is in balance.

Paul talks about the churches of Macedonia, in the midst of their affliction and great ordeal overflowing with generosity, finding abundant joy in their poverty, their lack of oil, I would call it. I see the same happening here at FPC in this year of plague and affliction of 2020: Sewing cloth masks and giving them away by the dozens; one of our teens discovering his love for baking and now giving those baked goods to others who need the nutrition and the uplift. Feeding those who are hungry here in Marshfield and around the world, through our Canasta Free Basic Basket give away last Spring, through the CROP walk, which raised \$3400 in October, and now the Deacons' Silent Auction 2020 pivot to support SOS and NOW. I believe this is what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Especially when we are in the darkness of delay and waiting: whether we are waiting for a safe and effective vaccine against COVID, or the results of our presidential election. We are called to be apocalyptic: looking for the truth to be revealed and ready to jump when the coach tells us to change.

I have a true story to tell you about something that happened to my husband Bob one Sunday when he was teaching a semester in Germany back in 2014. He had taken his students for a weekend trip to visit the famous Gothic cathedral in Nürnberg, St. Lorenzkirche. The Sunday he attended just happened to be the day the church was welcoming into their membership a new confirmation class. Here's how he tells what happened,

This was a group of thirteen-year-old Nürnberg children who sat in the pew directly behind me. The pastor gave a sermon that involved sheets of white paper included in our worship bulletins. At the start of his sermon, the pastor asked us to fold our papers in half, as he explained how our lives are often divided into parts. And then he made another fold in his paper, which we imitated, and more symbol analysis, and then some paper-tearing, and more explanation, and so on. I was trying to follow all this in rapid German, but things got complicated, and I was pretty sure I'd missed some folds and tears along the way. Which, it turned out, I had. Like most Lutheran churches, St. Lorenzkirche has prayer kneelers along the front of each pew with little desks to hold a worship book. After a great deal of folding and tearing and symbol analysis the pastor invited us to unfold our papers and spread them out along these benches, starting from the center and moving, in turn, toward the outside aisle, where I was sitting. As people unfolded their papers along the pew, each one turned, magically, into a small, perfectly formed white cross. Right up to

me. When I unfolded my paper, however, it didn't turn into a cross but a lopsided "H." So the bench looked like this:



If that wasn't bad enough, as soon as I set my paper on the bench, one of the confirmands behind me said in perfect English, "Jesus H. Christ," which cracked up the teenagers, which made me laugh, and which sent a ripple of concern through the church as a whole. Bob has kept that "H" since then. He says it helps him remember that, "grace is surprising and good things can come from our mistakes."^{iv}

I say to you: keep folding and tearing, even when the directions are muffled or seem like they are in a foreign language. Like the confirmation class in Germany, and ours that will meet at 11:00 on Sunday, we are all learning how to be disciples: one fold at a time. No matter how long or how dark it may seem. No matter how lost or confused you may feel. Remember the warning at the heart of this parable: Don't leave. Stay in the game to which Christ has called you. No matter whether you are in your quarter-life crisis, mid-life-crisis, or wherever you are in life: Jesus is with you, and is giving you the staying power to do what no one else can.

ⁱ Martha Tatarnic, "After the Unveiling: What if COVID-19 Changes Nothing?" *Christian Century*, July 29, 2020, p. 25.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ I first heard this idea on the Pulpitfiction.com podcast for this Sunday's lectionary texts, from comments on this parable by David Henson.

^{iv} Robert Leigh Davis, *Playful Wisdom: Reimagining the Sacred in American Literature, from Walden to Gilead*, (Rowman & Littlefield, Lexington Books: Lanham, MD, 2020), Acknowledgements page.