

Pentecost 23A. November 8, 2020. Matthew 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24.

Four years ago, after a very different election result but a not totally dissimilar election season, I insisted that the church's mission had not changed. The environment in which we were to work had, but we remained called, as we had been the week before, to proclaim the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to tell this hurting world that God will never stop pulling life out of the grip of death. We remained called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and in every way be in solidarity with the poor. We remained called to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee. To take our stand with the endangered, the neglected, the most vulnerable. To see and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all God's people, regardless of sex, gender, race, nation of origin, or sexual orientation. To work so that the image of God, imprinted on each and every one of our siblings in this world is not obscured by oppression and despair.

Today, with many of you in a very different mood, I say the same. Our rulers are changing, and that may lead to a dramatic change in our environment. Our mission and commitments remain the same. We were here trying to live in the resurrection of Jesus Christ before the last four tumultuous years, we tried to do it during the last four years, and we'll do it during the next three months and all the years that come after.

It feels strange to preach about the delay of the bridegroom, and how to conduct ourselves during the delay of the expected event, right after the end of such an agonizing delay. And I am aware that some among us today may feel a little like those wise bridesmaids, who made their preparations, stuck to their hopes, and got rewarded with their deserved party. But of course, an election is not the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Elections matter, who is ruling us matters, and how we organize our lives together matters very much. *And* this week has given us plenty of evidence that we are continuing to await the bridegroom who is the kingdom of heaven, when we will live together in peace and love. It is not here yet, and how we are to conduct ourselves during the delay remains the theological question of the hour.

When we look a little more closely at these wise bridesmaids, I wonder whether we still feel an affinity for them. This parable is strange. The foolish bridesmaids get all the blame, but the groom shows up to his own wedding at midnight, apparently without a bride or groom to go with him. And then he has the audacity to shut out people who had been waiting for him for hours. It seems to me that all the bridesmaids, so-called wise and foolish, make the same mistake by assuming that what matters about them is what they have. The foolish bridesmaids believe that because they have run out of oil, they must go get more, even at the risk of missing the party. They can't come to believe that their presence, as themselves, is enough for the party. And the so-called wise bridesmaids are so obsessed with scarcity that they would rather kick their partners out into the cold than take the risk of sharing. Again, they are so scared of not having enough that they resort to cruelty to preserve what they have.

If the kingdom of heaven has anything to do with the day of Lord, then Amos tells us that these wise bridesmaids have missed the point. Amos lived in a time of great prosperity and power in the north of Israel, but all of that prosperity and power was concentrated at the top.

While the poor suffered, the rich hoarded their wealth and practiced their piety. It is this empty piety, full of ritual but devoid of justice and mercy, that Amos is condemning. When the life we love is built on injustice, then God's interruption of it feels like bad news before it is good news. With Amos beside this parable, calling for justice and righteousness in a society of hoarded wealth and power, it is hard to feel like the wise bridesmaids got it right. If what we are waiting for is the kingdom of God, then our waiting cannot involve casting others out to protect our own position. It must instead involve using whatever resources we have to get us all through the delay, and especially those with less than we have. Getting ready for the God we have come to know through the prophets and Jesus Christ means loving others into readiness, too. It means getting us all through the wait for the kingdom of heaven.

Things are different today than they were two days ago. But the relief and even joy that I know is prominent, though not universal, in this congregation cannot become complacency. Our mission and commitments are the same. Our first loyalty remains to God and God's people throughout the world, especially those in need. And our hopes remain for the impossible reconciliation of the world to itself and to God. With gratitude and yes relief and yes joy, let's get to work. Amen.