

Ten Maids Awaiting

Loving God, awaken us from the slumber of habit and routine,
so that as we attend to scripture and sermon,
as we are touched by the beauty of worship and music,
our lives may be transformed and shaped by the Gospel. Amen.

There is a change in perspective about Jesus' second coming between First Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 25. Writing a short 20-25 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul was so sure that the end would come at any moment that he could write, "... *the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air ...*" Paul expected Jesus' second coming at any moment.

But by the time Matthew's Gospel was written, perhaps another 30 years later, the church was struggling to come to terms with a delay in the coming end. With Jesus in a holding pattern circling around the earth, when the expected end did not come on schedule, disciples had to grapple with problems of living in the interim. Thus, it's not surprising that Matthew is the only Gospel to use the word "church." And Matthew 18 deals with how to handle sin and forgiveness within the church, something we Presbyterians might consider the seeds of a first Book of Order.

The parable of the ten maids awaiting in Matthew 25:1-13 is part of what is called "the synoptic apocalypse." It is as though highlights of the book of Revelation has been dropped into each of the first three gospels. In Matthew, this apocalypse is found in chapters 24-25, just before the beginning of the passion narrative.

The question for today is just what do Matthew 25:1-13 teach us about the consummation? Actually, there are two answers to that question because verses 1-12 teach one thing, and the conclusion of the parable in v. 13 teaches another.

The conclusion (v. 13) urges us to “keep awake,” to stay alert as we wait for the consummation of the ages. It sounds a theme that is repeated many times in the Gospels: no one knows when the end will come. It cannot be calculated despite the parabolic saying: when you see the green sprouts on the fig tree then you know that summer is near, so when you see the signs of the coming end, know that the Messiah is near, at the very gates. No one knows, however, not the angels, nor even the son, but only the Father. No one knows when the end will come so stay awake! Be alert! Be ready for the sudden end!

The parable itself, however, teaches another lesson: the coming of the end is delayed. It comes at midnight. So, be prepared for a long wait. Look ahead and take enough oil for your lamps, so that the delay does not find you unprepared. A banquet is coming, a wedding feast, at the end of time when they shall come from east and west, from north and south and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the saints. But for now we live in an interim, we live in hope, prepared for a long delay. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, for in spite of a delay, the Lord is coming soon.

The problem is, parables often say something different from what we think or expect. Many of us think of Jesus’ parables as sermon illustrations, earthly stories with a heavenly meaning, told to make the meaning clear.

My wife Dottie graduated from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, was ordained and began to preach in a Presbytery mission church near Gaylord, Michigan. I chuckle to remember that as she began to preach she rummaged through my old sermons, picking out the illustrations, and throwing away the theology as she developed her own sermons. Of course, I’m exaggerating.

Sermon illustrations are good. But the problem is parables are not sermon illustrations. The parables of Jesus are counter intuitive. The purpose of parables is to conceal truth, not to reveal it. They hide meaning. They are like time-release cold tablets. They trouble us, make us think, and wonder. They puzzle us enough to send us away pondering their meaning. And then, at just the right moment, Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit, breaks through our defenses, and the truth of a parable finally becomes clear, and personal. We may not shout Aha! But we have that same sense of sudden illumination and personal discovery. Oh, now I see! “I once was blind but now I see.” Amazing grace!

Parables, if we allow them to seep deep into our hearts and minds, pave the way for a life change. They set the stage for us to “repent and believe the gospel.”

Recently I’ve been using the Daily Prayer app for devotional time. Last week the call to worship was a quote from Revelation 19:6, 7. “*Alleluia! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give God the glory.*” That was the day after the news with filled with the story of the little church in Texas where 26 people had been shot to death and another 20 wounded as they sat in their church pews. I was devastated by the contradiction: how can it be that the Lord our God the Almighty reigns when a little child is shot to death sitting in church?

One answer is that the kingdom of God is both “already” and “not yet.” It has already been established, but it is not yet fully realized. It was “at hand” in the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus, and yet it is hidden and concealed. It is “not yet” the visible and only reality which rules our world. It is “not yet” the reality which it is destined to be, and so we continue to pray, “Thy kingdom come,” and struggle to live as those who belong to the kingdom. Our church, though human, struggles to be a community and enclave on earth which demonstrates the reality of heaven, where God is in fact sovereign and Lord.

I think of Yogi Berra’s witticism, “It ain’t over ‘till it’s over.” And so I interpret the delay of Jesus’ second coming from the perspective of Philippians 1:6: “... *I am sure that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished on the Day of Christ Jesus*” (GNB). The purpose and intention of God is not blunted by the delay. We live with the promise that God will bring to perfection the meaning and purpose of our individual lives, even beyond the dark veil of death. And we cling to the promise that our world has a destiny and goal in the love of God, a world where children are not shot in church pews and nations do not hold the people of earth captive by the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Listen to the last paragraph that my wife Dottie used in a pastoral prayer at the end of May, 1992, in the little Presbyterian Church in Trenton, KY, just a few miles from Guthrie, KY, where Robert Penn Warren was born.

“One day we will know the end from the beginning.
One day we’ll stand before God face to face.
The veils that cloud our earthly existence will be gone forever.
We’ll understand then,
what time has to do with eternity,

what evil has to do with righteousness,
what great purpose God had in mind
when our human family was created
and this wonderful earth on which we live was given us.
We'll take our places with angels and archangels
and saints from all ages
and sing the one true song:
"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."
Thank you, Most Gracious God,
for the hope that you have planted
deep within the human heart
that that day will surely come,
that that song will surely be sung. Amen.

So, my friends, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, the time is drawing
nigh. And God, who began this good work in you, will carry it through until it is
finished on the Day of Christ Jesus." So be it. Amen.