

Choose This Day

A Sermon Preached by the
Reverend Gale W. Robb
November 9, 2008
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Matthew 25:1-13

Someone has noted that, “The month of November is a lectionary train wreck. The calendars of liturgical and secular feast days collide so that Halloween, All Saints’ Day, Thanksgiving, the busiest shopping day of the year, and lighting the first Advent candle all fall within 30 days.”¹ And that list doesn’t even include a national election.

The Old Testament lesson this morning is part of Joshua’s farewell speech to the Israelites. Knowing that he was coming to the end of his life, Joshua called the people together and charged them with keeping the covenant. In what is probably the most remembered and often quoted part of this farewell, Joshua said, “choose this day whom you will serve. . . but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Caught up in the moment, as we often are, the people roared enthusiastically that they, too, would serve the Lord. But Joshua didn’t accept their initial response. He went on to remind them, not once but three times, that the consequences of breaking that covenant would be dire, that God would do them harm and consume them; that they would be tried and tested time after time, and they would have to keep the covenant against all odds or there would be grave and serious consequences. It’s a sobering reminder of how difficult it is to keep faith with the promises and choices that we make.

The lectionary gods then thoughtfully paired that text with the Gospel parable of the ten bridesmaids, or, as I described it to my daughter earlier this week, the story of the mean girls and the silly girls: the silly girls who apparently didn’t bring enough oil for their lamps and were left standing outside banging on the door of the banquet hall, and the mean girls who weren’t about to share what they had, already inside enjoying the party. I would have to agree with one of my colleagues who said, “This is one of those moments when I am saying, ‘Thank you, Jesus, this is not the only parable about the kingdom of heaven’. . . (because, for one thing) the wise and foolish bridesmaids (are) making mincemeat out of the Beatitudes.”²

Well, we all make promises and we all make choices. The Israelites promised that they would, indeed, hang in there with God, that they would give up their allegiance to false gods and, like their wise and faithful leader Joshua,

¹ www.laureldykstra.com

² Anna Carter Florence, “Filling Stations,” November 4, 2007.

who had gotten them into the promised land, overcoming incredible odds along the way, they and their families would serve the Lord.

And even though we believe, as did the Israelites, that God has chosen us, not the other way around, we still have to respond to God's initiative by choosing to be faithful to God. And how difficult that can be when there is such an abundance of choices, such an overwhelming number of things that compete for our loyalty to God and our faithfulness to the covenant.

Writing about this passage, one parish pastor expressed her admiration for Joshua, saying, "He had real grit, that Joshua. . . As a parish minister, I assume Joshua's role when I invite people to affirm their covenant with God and one another. But I seldom have his courage in the follow-through. If I did, when parents brought their child for baptism, I would ask more than the generic (questions about bringing their child up in the knowledge and love of God." Instead I'd ask, in front of God and the whole congregation, 'Do you promise to get him or her out of bed, dressed and here every Sunday for the next 18 years, even when you've had a long week or you'd rather sleep in or there's a soccer match or when this darling infant has grown into a surly, tattooed teenager who thinks church is dumb?'"³ Having just baptized my own granddaughter last Sunday, reflecting on that made me stop and think about the promises that we all made for that baby, and the choices that will be faced as she grows up. We all know that it's not so easy to keep those promises when life interferes, with work and sports and dance recitals and school activities, when difficult choices have to be made.

And what about those bridesmaids? What are we to make of this parable that seems so out of character for Jesus, a parable that seems to challenge much of what we believe about the faithful God of the covenant? There seems to be a very fine line here between "me first" and taking care of myself, and simply being prepared. After all, "If taking care of yourself were the main message of the gospels, the miracle of the loaves and fishes never would have happened. Jesus wouldn't have lifted a finger for that hungry crowd, (at least) not if they hadn't packed their own picnic supper. Instead of 'The Feeding of the Five Thousand,' we would have 'The Moral of the Very Few Who Came Prepared,'"⁴ and that's really not what we believe the kingdom of heaven is all about, that's hardly what we want to teach our children about God.

We all like to be prepared, and we spend much of our lives doing just that: preparing. Preparing for every milestone that marks off our lives; preparing for a birth, preparing for kindergarten, and before you know it, preparing for college; preparing for our first job interview, a life-long relationship, a wedding, our own children; preparing for retirement, even preparing for death. We are part of a culture that practically worships planning and preparation, and goodness knows, I'm all for it. I don't want to be the one standing outside kicking myself because I didn't think to bring extra oil along.

³ Talitha Arnold, "True Grit," *Christian Century*, October 23-November 5, 2002, p. 18.

⁴ Anna Carter Florence

That's undoubtedly why it then makes us so angry and frustrated when things go wrong. When we wake up one morning to find that our life savings have been decimated by a volatile and unstable stock market. Hey, I did my part all my life to make sure I wouldn't end up dependent on my children or on welfare, and now almost everything I had has been wiped out by an economic crisis of biblical proportions. Or when we realize that we really are just one paycheck away from being homeless or that we have to choose between paying the utility bill or buying groceries.

And, of course, when with that wonderful thing called hindsight, we can look back and say "if we had been better prepared. . . this wouldn't have happened." If we had paid attention to the condition of the levees, if we had an emergency preparedness plan in place ahead of time, Katrina wouldn't have nearly wiped an entire city off the map and left thousands stranded and hundreds still homeless three years later.

Perhaps if we had been watching the financial skies more closely for signs of a meltdown, if we hadn't been so quick to load up on sub-prime mortgages, we wouldn't be dealing with the staggering and heartbreaking number of housing foreclosures.

Choose any disaster, from the Great Depression to Pearl Harbor to 9/11 to the latest Wall Street bail-out, of course we could have always been better prepared.

But surely that's not all there is to this parable. Surely there's more than just a reminder from the Boy Scouts or our insurance agent to "Be Prepared." Surely there's more to this lesson than five wise and five foolish bridesmaids.

A very gifted preacher and writer, Anna Carter Florence, invites us to think about it a different way. She writes, "Maybe this is not a story about how much oil you have. Maybe this is a story about the oil you carry with you. . . For all we know, the wise bridesmaids were down to their very last flask of oil, and the foolish bridesmaids were sitting on barrels of the stuff; the parable doesn't tell us. Its only concern is what they brought with them when they left the house. . . and that's significant."⁵

Yes, it is. Jesus said to his disciples, as he says to us, "You are the light of the world." Not only are we not to hide our light under a bushel basket, we're also charged with keeping the flame alive by having enough oil in the lamp to light the world. It's really easy to run out of oil, and when we do, we can't be the light of the world for anybody, no matter how much we want to.

Anna Carter Florence reminds us that, "It's fairly simple. When the arrow on the gas tank points to empty, you are going to run out of gas. If a two-year old doesn't get a nap, she is going to crash. When you haven't had a conversation with your spouse in three weeks that hasn't revolved around carpooling logistics, your marriage is getting dry. If you have worked eighty-hour weeks for longer than you care to know, your relationships are going to suffer. It's not really something any of us can avoid. There are just some kinds of fuel that just are not

⁵ Ibid.

negotiable; and if you eat junk food for twenty years, your body is going to let you know about it.”⁶

Her point is that we have to carry our spiritual fuel with us and pay attention when it’s running low. We need to know where the filling stations are along the way; we need to know where to find God when we’re running out of oil for our lamp, so that we can be spiritually replenished and good to go. We need to carry it with us at all times, because, as five bridesmaids learned, it’s not something we can borrow from somebody else.

How often have we said or heard it said about someone who’s just been given a wonderful opportunity, “boy, they were sure in the right place at the right time.” We usually forget that they had probably been diligent in preparing their resume, or making themselves available when the time was right, or following up on leads and checking openings; and even if they were asleep when the call came, their lamps were filled and they were ready to go.

We’re coming to the end of another church year. The first Sunday of Advent is just around the corner, November 30, and between now and then, we’re going to finish up the Gospel of Matthew with what’s been called “The Little Apocalypse.” This week with the ten bridesmaids, next week with the parable of the talents, all in preparation for Advent, when we prepare to receive the Christ child once again at Christmas.

It’s a good time to think about the kinds of choices that we make that drain the spiritual oil right out of us, that leave us unprepared to welcome Christ into our lives. Do the choices we make leave us too busy to make room for God? Do the choices we make, like the choices the Israelites made, get in the way of our promise to serve God? Have we been so caught up in the election or the financial crisis or football season or all the other false gods in our lives that we haven’t noticed that we’re running out of oil?

Well, good news. We can choose this day, right now, whom we will serve. There’s filling station right here where we can replenish our lamps by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless, listening to the sorrows of another person, offering help to someone in desperate financial trouble, making peace with someone we have disagreed with, visiting someone in a care facility, welcoming the stranger. There’s a filling station right here where we can be filled with all the things that keep our lamps burning: peace, generosity, love, patience, faithfulness, gentleness, forgiveness, justice and mercy. All we have to do is stop and choose whom we will serve. Amen.

⁶ Idem.