

Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, November 9, 2014

“The Ten Bridesmaids of the Apocalypse”

Amos 5:18-24

[The gospel text was read in two voices, as below, inspired by David Henson’s commentary here: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/the-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-undermines-a-parable/>]

Matthew 25:1-13, amplified

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.”

Do not deceive yourselves! If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. (1 Cor. 3:18-19a)

“When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’”

“Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you”
(Matt. 5:42)

“And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’”

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 23:13)

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

This has been one of those weeks when I'm *mostly* thankful for the lectionary – as I've wrestled with this text, trying to tease something like good news out of what feels like a weird fairy tale with a too-simple moral –

(as if maybe it's from the biblical version of Grimm's fairy tales, and a previous telling involved these so-called 'wise' bridesmaids casting out their innocent sisters into a forest inhabited by Red Riding-Hood's wolf, from whom they narrowly escape and then return bloody and injured to the wedding banquet where this cruel bridegroom, the one who kept them waiting so long in the first place, refuses to let them back in, with some platitudes about "well, maybe you should have known and brought along some bandages with your extra oil")

– as I looked at this text and wondered what on earth useful we can find in it, friends of mine across the country have been reading and pondering this same story with me, sharing wisdom and bemusement and lots of prayer. And yes, bible reflection can happen over Facebook, in case there was any doubt.

And then there have been other conversations where I would mention that I was struggling with preaching on this text, and other friends would be confused – that's a pretty straightforward story, isn't it? It's a message to Christians about being ready for Jesus!

And certainly that's in there too. But it's not quite that easy.

This story, along with a few others before and after it in these chapters of Matthew, seems to set up a pretty clean model for salvation: you're in or you're out and that's final. And when we are used to being "in" – for most of us whose religion has been the default in this country since its founding, whose class and race and sometimes sexuality has put us safely within the boundaries of what most people consider normal and good and right – a story of 'in versus out' does not trouble us. If we're – *obviously* – going to make it in, then why worry about those who are shut outside in the cold at midnight? They got what was coming, didn't they?

But, wait, what did they do? What separates those bridesmaids who are in and those who are out, really? If the key to salvation is carrying a flask of olive oil at all times, then why aren't we? And are we really supposed to send our friends out begging into the night when they're not as prepared as we are?

So what was their crime, those shut-out bridesmaids? They were there from the beginning, lamps burning brightly, excited and ready to celebrate their friend's wedding! The groom was the one who rudely kept the whole wedding party waiting, as if all of those women could just keep waiting for hours on end while he dawdled and primped and then arrogantly strode in 6 hours late to his own wedding.

All of them fell asleep, so that can't be it. And I can't imagine that the point of this story is that we should stockpile food and supplies and never share them, given how many times Jesus instructs his followers not to carry an extra tunic with them, or if they have two coats to give one away, or not to worry about food and clothes because God will provide.

So what would have happened if they all stayed? If those five bridesmaids hadn't been overcome by their fear of not having enough for the bridegroom – of not burning bright enough, not being *good*

enough – and just stayed, trusting that their love and care and effort would be enough? Or if those five prepared ones hadn't sent their friends away into the darkness, fearful that they didn't have enough oil either to make enough light for all of them?

What would have happened if all 10 of them had had the courage to wait together in the semi-darkness, knowing that the bridegroom was coming and trusting that their presence would be good enough?

What if, when he sums up this story for his disciples by saying “keep awake,” he really means, “don't go running off somewhere else when you hear that Jesus is coming”? Stay put, keep waiting, have faith.

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In the campus ministry at UD, we've been playing with images of light, and flame, and stars, as we talk about everything from God's light within us (and what does that mean?) and how we can share God's light with others and with the world. For students who come from a variety of faith backgrounds, both within the church and outside of it, the light of God is a powerful image, and gives us language to talk about those times when we feel God burning brightly – when our faith is strong and full of passion and excitement – as well as those times when the light feels dim or distant – when we are overwhelmed by stress or anxiety, doubt, pain.

Because it is hard to sustain the light of faith all the time. No matter how strong our conviction or our religious education or our passion for justice, it is a challenge to keep a flame burning in a world that can so often feel overwhelming in its dark and cold and gusting winds. We have hopes and visions of God's kingdom, of the ways that Jesus teaches lived out in the flesh, and sometimes that world seems impossibly far away. How can we believe the kingdom of God is at hand, when it is so hard to live that way? How can it be true that the peacemakers will be blessed, that the last will be first, when so often it seems just the opposite?

One of our favorite songs for campus ministry worship comes from Katy Perry:

You've got to ignite the light,
And let it shine –

Cause baby, you're a firework
Come on, show 'em what you're worth.
Make 'em go ah-ah-ah
As you shoot across the sky.

Boom, boom, boom,
Even brighter than the moon, moon, moon
It's always been inside of you,
And now it's time to let it through.

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At those times when we get too comfortable with neat stories of who is in and who is out, because obviously *we* are in, or else we are wracked with guilt and shame because our light is just not burning

bright enough this week and we will never get into heaven that way – perhaps at those times we might remember these disconcerting words from the prophet Amos:

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why do you want the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, not light;
as if someone fled from a lion,
and was met by a bear;
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
and was bitten by a snake.

The day of the Lord is never what we expect, especially when we get too comfortable with easy answers to who is in and who is out, who is wise and who is foolish, when we start to rest in thinking "well, I'm in, so bring it on!"

Because if there is one thing of which Amos wants to assure us, it is that God's "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." And that is not just a pretty little trickle, off to the edge of a nice pastoral scene – no, the rightness of God will come in like a tidal wave, sweeping us off our feet so we come up coughing and sputtering, looking around at a world that has changed in ways we cannot even imagine.

God's logic is not like our logic. And when we start to think we know just what God means when we hear that all wrongs will be set right and all people treated with justice; that we know who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, who is wise and who is foolish – at those times God will send prophets who stand up and say NO.

In the words of another prophet, God has *told* you, O mortal, what is good. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. We try to make it more complicated than that, but it's right there. God has told us; now we go and do it.

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Watch the video for Katy Perry's 'Firework' here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGJuMBdaqIw>

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Friends, the light you bring is enough. No matter how brightly it burns or how dimly it sputters, it is enough. Go out into the world, full of God's grace, and share your light with others. Amen.