

LIGHT THE WAY

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
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But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." (Matthew 25:9)

Many years ago the church I belonged to had a basketball team that played in a city-wide interfaith league. We were able to recruit only seven or eight players. We weren't very good, but every so often we managed to win a game. Not a few of those victories might be attributed to one of our players named Dale. Dale was a respected member of the church and local business community. He was a solidly built left-handed guy, but on the basketball court he couldn't put two dribbles together to save his life. If you passed him the ball he would panic, and rifle it back to you as if the game were dodgeball, not basketball. Or, he simply would hand the ball over to the opposing team. Dale was no religious bigot. He would turn over the ball to anyone of any faith – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew – unless you were a fellow Episcopalian. His occasional attempts to score looked more like the toss of a shot-put than anything else. Dale didn't know how to play defense either. Pity any player on the other team who dared a lay-up near Dale. That player undoubtedly would find himself sprawled on the floor seeing stars. Dale would take him out as if the game were football, not basketball. Dale never meant to hurt anyone, he just didn't know how to play.

Nevertheless, Dale was our secret weapon and here's why: Dale had the loudest voice I have ever heard in my life. He was even louder than Thomas! You've probably guessed by now that Dale spent most of his time on the bench. In fact, he eventually gave up playing altogether. Even still, Dale would come to the games, suit up, roar and yell and fill the gymnasium with his voice so that no one could ignore it. He shouted encouragement for us, and he distracted the other players at crucial moments. Whenever a referee made a questionable call against us, Dale would thunder with all the fury of the prophet Amos railing against injustice. The sheer volume of Dale's bellowing became his special gift to the team. It was his trademark, his niche. It was a ministry. He became known in the league for it. Dale had a singular purpose: yelling. He knew the one thing he could do well, and he did it.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is about a marriage feast. Not much is known about wedding customs in the days of Jesus, but we can deduce from the parable that the ceremony and several days of festivities would all take place at the home of the bride's family. When everything was ready, the bridesmaids were to take torches by night, go out to meet the bridegroom, and light the way for him as he made his way to the marriage feast. Some ancient writings and stories suggest that not only did the bridesmaids light the way, they also did a ceremonial dance upon meeting the bridegroom.

So it was that ten particular bridesmaids took their torches and went out to meet a particular groom. As chance would have it, the groom was delayed. The bridesmaids waited, and eventually stuck their torches into the ground, sat down, and fell asleep. *But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him."* They all woke up and readied themselves, but five of the ten noticed that their torches had nearly run out of oil. Worse yet, these "foolish" five had brought no extra fuel with them. The other five had indeed brought emergency supplies of olive oil, but these "wise" maidens were unwilling to share it, reasoning that they would need every last drop to keep their own torches lit for the procession to the marriage feast. So the

foolish five hurried off into the night hoping to find a merchant who would sell them oil. While they were gone, the bridegroom came, and the five who were ready escorted him to the wedding.

What happens next is one of Matthew's classic door-slammed-in-your-face moments. The story goes that the foolish bridesmaids actually did procure some extra olive oil for their lamps. They arrived at the banquet late, long after the party started, only to be met at the door by the bridegroom himself. "*Lord, lord, open to us,*" was their plea. But his only response was a stern, "*Truly, I tell you, I do not know you.*" It's a harsh reply, but that's it: you're too late. Finally the warning, *Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

"The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens," as it's usually called, is charged with many layers of spiritual meaning, and over the centuries people have found different ways to interpret it. The earliest Christians expected the risen and ascended Jesus to return from heaven and bring all of history to a close within their lifetime. They were troubled by the delay, but took solace when they remembered the parable Jesus told about the delayed bridegroom. The lesson for them was to stay ready, always. As time went on, others heard the more general message that if you can't borrow someone else's oil, neither can you borrow someone else's faith. You have to work on your own now. Last minute scrambling will leave you on the wrong side of the door. Add to these interpretations the surreal, dream-like aspects of the story: the midnight hour, the torch-lit procession of maidens, and the door that is slammed shut on the foolish five. It should be clear by now that we have an interesting parable on our hands.

Today, however, it is not these meanings and nuances of the parable that strike me. I am drawn to other aspects of it. First, the Bridegroom himself. Notice that although he is delayed in coming, still he has a direction and a purpose. He is surely making his way from point-A to point-B. Likewise, God. Just as the bridegroom has a destination and a purpose, so does God have a goal in mind. God is not in the business of creating the universe and redeeming humanity for lack of anything better to do. God is not traveling around in circles. God has a driving desire to reach an objective: the joining of heaven and earth.

In figurative, even whimsical language, St. Paul was stating much the same thing in the portion of his First Letter to the Thessalonians (4:13-18) that we heard today. *For 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 the 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; and so we will be with the Lord forever.* It's a passage that has caused enormous confusion, and has been taken to ridiculous extremes by fringe groups over the centuries. I ask you: did Paul think that God literally was "up there," and that when Jesus returned we would defy gravity and meet the Lord in the air? Did he think that God actually was going to blow on a physical trumpet? Of course not. Paul was using poetic imagery to encourage the grief stricken. He was trying to express an indescribable truth: that God's will is the join heaven and earth, including the living to the dead so that none are lost. God has a purpose. God has a goal. God is on the move.

If Paul used uplifting language, Jesus told intriguing stories, more than a few about wedding banquets. These parables all point to the marriage feast in the New Jerusalem, where God shall declare that death will be no more, where sorrow and crying and pain will be no more, where God shall wipe away every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21). What is more, God's stated desire is to gather as many of us as are willing around the table there. So here is the message – truly startling, when you think about it – that history is not reckless and life is not pointless. God is working his purpose out mysteriously and invisibly through all the crazy things that have happened in 2020: the pandemic, the politics, the protests, the lawsuits against the church, all of it. The Bridegroom is on the move with a goal in mind: the marriage of heaven and earth.

Then we have the bridesmaids. At the start of the parable, all ten of them were insiders. They were honored guests based on their inside relationship with the bride. They were her trusted friends. In this role, or on this team, if you like, they had a singular purpose and responsibility: to light the way for the bridegroom, and do a little dance. Wait, you say, that's two things. Yes, but it was all part of their one responsibility. The lighting and the dancing were all part of the one thing they were asked to do. They had one job. It was their ministry. It was a simple thing. It was the only thing they had to do. But five didn't do it.

Perhaps their failure to act can help us understand why the bridegroom turned away the foolish five and said to them, "I do not know you." Why should he know them? When the moment came for them to meet the bridegroom and get acquainted, they were not there. They were not there to light his way. They were not there to dance him into the wedding banquet. The one thing they were asked to do, they did not do. The one role they were asked to play, they did not play. The one purpose they were given to fulfill, they did not fulfill. So later on when they arrived at the door all dressed up as bridesmaids, the critical moment had passed. The window for getting acquainted with the Bridegroom had closed. No relationship had been established. Time's up. Too late.

"Too late" might serve as a two-word summary of the Book of Amos, the prophet. Amos preached in the northern kingdom of Israel over 700 years before Jesus. It was actually a time of outward prosperity, but Amos railed against the underlying injustices in the legal system and marketplace that brought abundance to a few at the expense of the many. The political leaders were supposed to be accountable to God's Law, but as we heard in today's reading (5:18-24), Amos saw right through their hypocrisy. "You're looking forward to the Day of the Lord?" chided Amos. "You ought not to be. It is darkness, not light." Amos saw God's judgement coming in the form the larger, Assyrian nation, and it was too late for the Israelites to reform their corrupt society. It was as if he were saying to the leaders, "You had one job: *let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*" Wait, you say, that's two jobs. Yes, but it was all part of their one divine calling. Justice and righteousness were two parts of the one thing they were asked to do. But they didn't do it.

Most Biblical commentators suggest that the best way to read Amos is as a cautionary tale. History bears out that the Assyrians did indeed come and sack the Israelites, and that was the end for the northern kingdom. "Too late" was their legacy. Likewise, the five foolish bridesmaids arrived back too late to fulfill their singular purpose. They too provide a cautionary tale. The good news of cautionary tales is that they generally come before it's too late for those who hear them. Thus, it is not too late for us who read Amos and the parable to ask what it means to be lighting the way of the Lord in this midnight hour of 2020 and beyond.

What does it mean for Grace Church? God has blessed us abundantly with a vibrant congregation, glorious architecture, and a strategic location. We should consider ourselves insiders at the marriage feast whom God has entrusted with a sacred responsibility. It is amazing grace, indeed, to be called friend by the Lord of hosts. What does it mean for us as individuals to be lighting the way of the Lord? To be sure, different people have different callings, and if yours is to be torchlight dances in the streets after midnight, more power to you. Do I dare mention what might be a common purpose for all of us – both as a church and as individuals? Now that the election is finally over, perhaps we can begin to move forward in the work of healing the bitter divisions in our society. I like to think I would say the same thing no matter who the President-elect turned out to be. Our singular purpose as the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. We have ample oil in our lamps for lighting the way of the Lord, both as

a church and as individuals. The joy of discipleship – the joy of following Jesus is discerning where and when God wants us to shine, and then doing it.

I remember Dale, all those years ago on the church basketball team. He discovered what he could do for the good of the cause, and he did it with gusto and abandon. He did one thing. He had one purpose. He had one calling. He can be an inspiration for those who think they can't string two prayers together, or who don't have much to give, or who aren't spiritual enough. Perhaps you don't have a loud voice like Dale or Thomas, or, as in my case, you can't dance to save your life. (The concept eludes me.) Take heart: we can all light the way for the Lord, and the least of us can become the heart and soul of a Christian community. It is not too late for us!

The marriage feast is waiting,
the gates wide open stand;
rise up, ye heirs of glory,
the Bridegroom is at hand.

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