

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Proper 27, Year A
Matthew 25:1-13

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Prepare for wonderful

Today's program is sponsored by Pat Dean in honor of Lynn Isaac.

Party, party, party! Celebrate, celebrate, celebrate! We wake up this morning, and Jesus is talking about how the kingdom of heaven is like a party. In particular, it is like a wedding banquet. We know that in Jesus' time, it was common for a whole village to stop working so that everyone could celebrate a wedding together. People in the first century had a lot of hardship and pain in their lives, which made it all the more important to take time now and then for joy. The joy of a wedding was a very festive event.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus focuses on the way people prepare for the wedding banquet, or not. When we say, "be prepared" the phrase brings up images of boy scouts being prepared with a first-aid kit on a camping trip, or knowing how to use the fire extinguisher, or having a flashlight and batteries in case the power goes out. When we say "be prepared" we usually mean "prepare for emergencies." "Prepare for emergencies" is good sound advice. It is definitely a good thing to have a first-aid kit, a fire extinguisher, a working flashlight. When an emergency happens, you will be very glad that you prepared for it.

"Prepare for emergencies" is good advice. But in today's gospel reading, Jesus goes beyond "prepare for emergencies." Jesus' message to us is "prepare for wonderful." Go ahead and prepare for things that could go wrong, but also prepare for things that could go right. 98% of life is not an emergency, so prepare for the good and exciting things in life, too. When you prepare for wonderful, wonderful is more likely to happen. The wise women in today's gospel reading prepare for the wonderful celebration of the wedding banquet by keeping their lamps burning through the dark night, because they are preparing for the arrival of the bridegroom.

We can see even in ordinary life how preparing for wonderful works. For example, losing weight is very difficult, and even the best diets have a very low success rate. But there is one time when women consistently beat the odds in weight loss. That

is when they are about to get married. Even women who cannot lose weight at any other time in their lives, manage to drop the extra pounds before their wedding. The reason is that the woman has a clear picture in her mind of herself in the most beautiful white dress she has ever worn, gliding down the aisle as a thin, svelte bride. A bride-to-be is preparing for wonderful. And preparing for wonderful gives her the motivation to eat celery instead of fries, and to pound out the miles on the treadmill, so that on her wedding day, the way she looks is wonderful.

Preparing for wonderful makes wonderful things more likely to happen in all sorts of ways. Thomas Jefferson summed up one of them. He said, "I am a great believer in luck. And I find that the harder I work, the luckier I get." He is right, of course. Preparing for wonderful not only makes wonderful things more likely to happen, it also makes us better able to recognize them and take advantage of them when they do happen.

And preparing for wonderful is also exciting. There is an octogenarian who told people, "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened." I wonder how many hours in our lives we spend worrying about bad things that never actually happen. How would our lives be different if we spent those hours preparing for wonderful instead of worrying about terrible? If the wonderful thing ends up not happening, you have had the joy of anticipation. But there are plenty of times when the wonderful things you prepared for will happen, and give you more joy.

What Jesus is talking about in today's gospel includes all the things we have been talking about to prepare for wonderful: having a wonderful picture in mind, hard work, and joy. And Jesus goes deeper than that, because what Jesus is talking about is preparing for wonderful in preparing for God. In today's gospel passage, what these ten young women are preparing for is a party, a wedding banquet, and specifically the arrival of the bridegroom to get the celebration started. It is an exciting event. The bridegroom is, of course, Christ himself. The ten young women are to keep their lamps shining so that they are ready to meet Christ and celebrate with him.

Jesus is telling us to prepare for wonderful in our spiritual lives. One parishioner was telling me about how great the wet leaves smelled and how mild the temperature was, and how he was driving through the fall foliage saying to himself, "Thank you, God. Thank you, God." That response of thanking God for God's wonders welled up in him

in that moment because of a lifetime of spiritual practices, a life of preparing for God's wonders. It reminded me of a line from one of our prayers at the Eucharist, "Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us." The ability to see God at work is a gift of grace. But by grace, God gives us spiritual practices to help us do that, to help us prepare for God's wonders. Reading in scripture how God has been at work in the lives of people in the past helps prepare us to see God working wonders in our lives. One of the benefits of prayer is that it focuses our attention on preparing for God's wonders in the situation we are praying for. If you have ever had a thought from a sermon stick with you, it was because you prepared for God's work in you by first showing up for church, and then by paying attention to the sermon. When you teach a child or nurture a child's faith, you are preparing for God to work wonders in that child's life in ways you cannot predict. And more than likely, in your life too.

It is a delight to preach this passage to this group of people because you have prepared for God's wonders in so many amazing ways. It is not an exaggeration to say that this congregation's existence today is because of your preparations for God's wonders. Even in the most difficult times, you have kept your faith in God burning. You did not know exactly how things would turn out, but you had faith that God would bring about wonders. You have given of your time, talent, and treasure because you believed that God would do something wonderful with them.

Now that we are in stewardship season, we are reminded that giving generously to your faith family and its ministries is a way to prepare for wonderful. We understand that people are in a variety of financial circumstances, and we are definitely grateful for every gift, including the widow's mite. We also encourage everyone who can to increase your pledge by 1% of your income this year, as a gradual progress toward a tithe, and if you don't feel like doing the math, there is an insert in your bulletin that will do the math for you.

Serving the church with your time and talent is also a way of preparing for wonderful. The wonderful things that happen in our worship services, fundraising events, book group, thrift store, visits to the sick with flowers, spiritual autobiography presentations, Celtic services, conversations, and relationships that happen around here is because people give their time and talent to prepare for wonderful. And preparing for

wonderful also involves welcoming and embracing new people to our congregation who also wanted to participate in preparing for wonderful, and are participating in great ways.

And have wonderful things happened? Yes, yes, yes, yes. In every way, from tangible things, to relationships that are honest and affectionate, to a deeper commitment to your faith, and most important of all, a deeper sense of God's presence in your lives. And another wonderful thing is that you have learned through experience to keep on preparing for wonderful, to keep on preparing for God, because you know from experience that God will show up. And when God shows up, you will celebrate!

There is plenty of celebration in today's scripture passage, but there are painful parts in it too. The five foolish young women do not take any oil with them to refill their lamps and provide fuel for the lamp's fire. Then at midnight when they really need the light of their lamps, they don't have it. They ask the wise women to give them some of their oil. But the wise women reply, "No, there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And they never do get into the banquet.

The light we are talking about here is the light of faith. I wish I could tell you that people never lose their faith. But scripture is too honest to let me get away with that. Jesus tells us the painful truth that people do lose their faith. And losing faith is most common when we stop providing fuel for the light of faith in our lives. God offers us so many opportunities to provide the fuel that enables the light of faith in our lives to burn brightly. We know the things that fuel our faith: prayer, worshipping together, helping those in need, singing praise to God, sacraments, giving thanks, studying scripture. God gives us these practices as fuel to keep our faith alive and glowing. All we have to do is take them, put that fuel into our lives. It is sad when midnight comes and in the darkness, people really need the light of faith, and they don't have it. But it happens.

We might think that the wise women ought to give their oil to the foolish women. We have been taught since preschool that sharing is the nice thing to do. And so we get a little uncomfortable when these women are not behaving in a way that seems nice. And yet, we have to wonder whether these wise women are actually telling an uncomfortable but important truth. They say, "No, there will not be enough oil for you and for us." Are these wise women right?

I have a friend from high school who started out life with the flame of faith burning beautifully and cheerfully. She started out fueling her faith with all the resources available to her and kept her flame strong. And then she got involved with a man who did not have faith, and he began asking her to give up the things that fueled her faith. She thought she should be nice to him. So she gave up the things that fueled her faith. To accommodate him, she missed church more and more often. She thought, I don't really have to go to church; I can worship God anywhere. But as it turned out, she didn't spend time worshipping. He thought prayer was stupid, so she stopped praying when he was around, thinking that she could pray when she was alone. But once she got out of the habit, prayer didn't happen very often. She thought if she was nice he would eventually become more accepting of her faith. But all that happened was that when she gave away the fuel of her faith, her own light gradually became dimmer, and feebler, and quietly died out.

In this painful and honest passage, Jesus has a message for all of us. And if society has taught women especially that they ought to be nice, then it is an especially valuable message for women. Jesus' message is: Don't let anyone starve your faith. Keep your lamp burning brightly and don't let anyone take away the fuel of your faith.

Sometimes the issue is simply busyness. If you feel that the demands of meeting everyone else's needs make it hard for you to have time and space to nurture your own faith, Jesus is telling you it's okay to tell people no. Society may tell you to be a nice woman, but Jesus tells you to be a wise woman. Go ahead and tend your own flame. Fuel the fire in your soul and see it grow brighter and more radiant. You won't help anyone by depleting your own resources. What really helps people is letting your light shine into the world. It illuminates the darkness for everyone around you. People will be attracted to your glow. And if they have oil in their own lamps, your own flame can ignite in their souls too.

Prepare yourself for wonderful. Prepare for God. Wonderful things are coming. Wonderful things are here. God is coming. God is here. Let's celebrate.