

November 8, 2020 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Amos 5:18-24, Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-20
Matthew 25:1-13

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, posted on Nov. 1, 202, The Story of the Bridesmaids.

Ideas from A Post-Election Pastoral Letter sent by Rev. Amanda Gerkens-Nelson, Executive Directory Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, Nov. 5, 2020. Jan Richardson's poem: The Art of Enduring: For Holy Saturday.]]

Let us pray... May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Holy God. Amen.

Grace and light to you, beloved in Christ Jesus.

Oh friends, what a week, what a week.

Take a breath, a big deep breath.

Do you know what I mean when I speak of Holy Saturday?

That might sound like an absurd question for I confess that the days and weeks are blurring together.

And they certainly don't all feel holy, though they are.

Stick with me here.

Holy Saturday is less a thing in our tradition than in, say, the Roman Catholic Church.

The Gospel accounts of Holy Week leave a space between the Friday when Jesus was killed,
and the Sunday when he rose.

Between what we've come to call Good Friday and Easter morning
there is this quiet in-between day, a Saturday, Holy Saturday.

In our calendar, this falls in March or April, depending on the year.

The cross has been stripped bare on Friday, and Jesus' body rests in the tomb.

Outside the garden, beyond the tomb, the women didn't know how the next morning would dawn.

The disciples locked away in grief and fear certainly didn't know the resurrection would come.

On *this* side of the cross, we can see the arc of death to life, and that elongated waiting time,
but they could scarcely see the next hour, let alone the next morning.

Holy Saturday is a day for vigil keeping and preparation,

but mostly, when we're honest, it's a day for waiting:

for dwelling in the unknowns, the not-yets, the grief, the fear, maybe the residual hope, if there's any left.

That's Holy Saturday.

It's Holy Saturday that's been on my mind and heart this week, this election week.

We've been waiting, keeping vigil, praying, laboring, counting, protesting, quarantining.

We've been trying to go about our days, maybe to corral our news-intake.

Election webpages have been refreshed, and refreshed once again.

Plenty of us have confessed to being cranky,
anxious in the waiting, in the newly-knowns and in the not-yet-knowns.

We've been waiting, a painful, awkward, not-sure-what-to-say, wring-our-hands, hold-our-breath, kind of waiting.

When we get down to it, a lot of our life is spent in Holy Saturday, it's the in-between time.

We might think of Holy Saturday when keeping vigil at a loved ones bedside, not sure if they will survive, uncertain how life might look if they do, or if they don't.

Or Holy Saturday can be the messy, mucky time when a relationship goes off the rails,

or when mental health weighs heavily,

or when parenting seems impossible,

or when faith feels distant,

or when the security of employment or housing is lost and it's hard to see through to the next thing.

That tender place is Holy Saturday.

"Keep awake," we hear at the end of today's gospel,

"Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Our parable is the first of three we'll hear over these next weeks from Matthew chapter 25.

These are end-times passages, judgement parables, looking ahead to the second coming of Jesus, which it seems is taking its own sweet time to arrive.

Matthew's community must have been tired, exhausted, in fact.

The first generation that had followed Jesus has died waiting for his return.

The second generation, the ones who'd heard stories, they've gotten old.

For 60-some years they'd been waiting, wondering, hoping, praying.

Now the temple is gone.

Now the Jewish community has scattered.

What should they do? Just go away? Give up?

Or keep their faith, kindle the light?

"Keep awake" we hear, keep awake.

It's tempting in all these parables to jump to conclusions, to draw the lines:

this character must be so and so, and this one, this must be God.

More and more we're learning that this may not be the best way to read parables.

Rather than parables being neat and tidy, with plenty of answers, maybe the job of a parable is to call us into deeper reflection.

Today's parable of the waiting bridesmaids does just this, it's a tough one.

Why don't those supposedly wise bridesmaids just share what they've got instead of being so stingy?

Why are the doors so quickly shut tight? And who is doing the shutting?

Where is that bridegroom? And why in the world does he arrive so late?

The classic interpretation of this parable, the one that gives us answers, warns us to stay awake, to be ready, alert, to be like wise bridesmaid, supplies and back up supplies in hand.

But did you notice that in the parable they all fall asleep? The so called wise, and the so called foolish?

...Drowsy, every one of them, falling asleep during the wait.

So if they all fall asleep, what then distinguishes the wise from the foolish?

Maybe their big mistake for the so-called-foolish is that they leave:

that they get all bumbled up about oil (do they have enough?),

when it's really their presence that the bridegroom desires.

They miss the celebration, the groom misses them, the community isn't whole.

Debie Thomas confesses: "I totally *get* the 'foolish' bridesmaids in this ... moment."

She continues, "I get how hard it is to stick around when my 'light' is fading and my reserves are low.

I get what it's like to scramble for perfection, to insist on having my ducks in a row before I show up in front of God, or the church, or the world."

Then she goes on, "Only a bridesmaid who trusts in the groom's deep and unconditional compassion,

only a bridesmaid who knows that the groom has light and oil to spare,

only a bridesmaid who understands that her presence — messy and imperfect though it might be —

is of intrinsic value to the groom,

will find the honesty and the courage to stay."

The posture for waiting, then, is one of courage, even when we're afraid or feeling inadequate.

Show up, show up in all your complicated messiness, for as Debie Thomas writes, "the groom delights in you—not in your lamp."

Or maybe their mistake is one of trusting scarcity, of hoarding.

Here it's not the so-called-foolish making the mistake, but the so-called-wise who refuse to share.

What would have happened if they shared their oil?

Or what would have happened if they just stood together and shared their light?

Empathy and compassion, hospitality and sharing all are moot when scarcity reigns.

And with these values, goes the bridal couples chance to enjoy the company of their friends.

The wedding party, the community, it is diminished.

It's tempting to get pointy, judge-y, to worship our rightness, rather than sharing our abundance, an abundance that really was never ours in the first place.

I spent yesterday afternoon along Lake Street at a lively, colorful march called Together We Rise.

36-some organizations had come together to host it:

climate groups, MN Interfaith Power and Light, Black Visions, Latinx organizers, groups working for indigenous power, and immigration and police reform, Planned Parenthood, the unions, ISALAH, Muslims and Christians and Jews,

Along with Nick Tangen from our congregation, and plenty of others, I'd accepted an invitation to be a "marshal" for this march.

This was a new role for me and I was a little nervous:

Along with masks and distancing,

we were decked out in super swanky neon orange and yellow safety vests.

With teams, we blocked the traffic at intersections so the crowd could pass safely.

If tensions flared, we were the de-escalation folks, keeping it peaceful—and it was.

As I was driving to our meeting spot on Saturday morning, news of the election decision came.

That energy was in the air, there is no question,

and yet I don't think any one of us was convinced that Holy Saturday is over, the waiting complete.

How will this transition of power go? Will there be violence?

This election brought into even sharper reality the stark divisions of our nation and our communities—

frankly, it was terrifying. How will we move in and through this division?

What shape might healing take?

How does all we've learned in the months since George Floyd's murder shape us to notice the white

supremacy in our midst, or the systems desperate for reform, or the beloved not yet free?

And how does a raging pandemic heighten the disparities, the grief, the trauma, in this time?

The thing with being a marshal is that we weren't supposed to watch the action in the crowd, but rather to face outward toward the traffic.

To experience a march with all the intensity of this time was powerful, emotional.
I could sense the yearning, the anticipation of this massive group behind us,
But instead I focused on the drivers and those who passed by: curious, hungry,
perhaps concerned, mostly asking questions, leaning out of car windows to join in,
yearning for something new. It was palpable.

Dear ones, while it's certainly a time to breathe more deeply,

let us be honest, while the burden may be lighter, Holy Saturday is not over, not yet.
In this time the Spirit is bringing to birth something new, something more just.
We wait still for Jesus' coming again,
alert to the needs,
awake to the cries,
embodying the hope that endures.
trusting the Savior's light to be our light.

I close today with a poem by Jan Richardson:

"The Art of Enduring, For Holy Saturday"

This blessing
can wait as long
as you can.

Longer.

This blessing
began eons ago
and knows the art
of enduring.

This blessing
has passed
through ages
and generations,
witnessed the turning
of centuries,
weathered the spiraling
of history.

This blessing
is in no rush.
This blessing
will plant itself
by your door.

This blessing
will keep vigil
and chant prayers.

This blessing
will bring a friend
for company.

This blessing
will pack a lunch
and a thermos
of coffee.

This blessing
will bide
its sweet time

until it hears
the beginning
of breath,
the stirring
of limbs,
the stretching,
reaching,
rising

of what had lain
dead within you
and is ready
to return.