

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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There's a scene in a romantic comedy from several years ago where the heroine was given her big break to interview an important person coming out of a courthouse and hopefully climb the ladder at her news agency. Right before the verdict is announced, she decides to rush into the corner store for a pack of cigarettes, but there is a long line and ends up missing the big story. A bit later, through the magic of the romantic comedy, she sweet-talks one of the lawyers in the case and finally gets her interview. All's well that ends well.

That's more or less what happens in the gospel story today. We all get our lamps out and go hang out, waiting for our chance to see a well-dressed bridegroom come down the street. Why we all want to do this in the middle of the night is not entirely clear to me, but this is before they had Netflix, so I suppose seeing a wedding procession was quite a big deal back in the day. We all show up to see the parade, and half of us have remembered to bring extra oil and some of us haven't. Our candles go out, we run to the store to get some more oil, and low and behold, while we're at the store, we miss the parade and the bridegroom. And, because this is the gospel of Matthew and not a romantic comedy, we do not get a second chance by being cute like Renee Zellweger. Instead, we are cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And we regret our lack of preparation for all time.

This seems like a brutal gospel, and I can see why people like watching movies a lot better than reading the Bible. Still, I'm going to do what I can to help us engage with this story a bit and see if it is still saying something to us in this modern age.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: if you're looking for a really angry gospel, look no further than the Gospel of Matthew. This is new for some and a refresher for others, but the community to which Matthew is writing is a group that was largely Jewish in their makeup and was divided as to whether Jesus was the Messiah prophesied by the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. The answer to this question split the community down the middle, and the author of Matthew is writing to those who were kicked out. And, as you might imagine, they are still pretty salty. And in lots of these stories in Matthew, you have two camps: wheat and chaff, sheep and goats, and in today's story, those who were prepared for the wedding parade and those who were not. I think that we are supposed to take comfort in the fact that we are the righteous ones who were prepared and that the unrighteous ones who are not prepared will really be sorry someday.

This makes a lot of sense if you're trying to find a way to cope with the deep grief of being cut off from a community. It's natural to be angry and hurt and want to lash out and to imagine that you are the hero of the story and that the others are awful and unrighteous.

But the truth is that most Christians aren't one or the other. There are days when you feel like you are in a good place to see God coming down the street, dressed as a groom for his wedding. And there are other days when you have run out of lamp oil and have to run to the store and find yourself missing the whole thing.

How many times have I missed the presence of God right in front of me because I was too distracted or busy? How many times have I found myself unprepared for the tasks that needed to be done for my neighbor because I did not prepare? When I read this story, I know that its authors want me to identify with the righteous and the prepared. But that is not how my Christianity has looked for the last 45 years. I am a Christian, but I am also sometimes distracted, petty, vain, arrogant, abrupt, and even some days, not terribly faithful. I relate to the people who are stuck in the store looking for oil. I feel like I am constantly stumbling into my faith rather than having it as a clear and easy signpost in my life. I have a hard time identifying with the superheroes in the bible, but I have no problem identifying with the misfits.

So, the question really is this: is there room in this story for someone like me? I know that in this story, Jesus is quite harsh to all of those who weren't ready to see him. But I wonder if the story is meant to shock. Because Jesus tells it, not as a fact or as a blueprint for life, but rather as a parable—as a story that is meant to instruct. Maybe Jesus is saying that now is the time to notice God walking down the street toward you. Maybe now is the time to stop spending some much time reacting and having to run to the store—or in my case probably spending too much time on my phone. Maybe this story—even though it is harsh—is using a particular kind of language that will help us move our lives a bit more in alignment with Jesus.

I am no expert on these things, and I don't know why in one place in the Bible Jesus will fight to find a lost sheep or to forgive a sinner seven times seven times, when here, today, in the story Jesus says that if you forget your oil, you're out of luck. I think I will stick with the merciful Jesus if I'm given a choice. But I do think that the gift of the harsh Jesus is that the very sharp edge of the words can shake us out of that complacency that is so easy to find ourselves in. And maybe this tone helps us understand that there are places in the world where the need really is urgent and does require us to pay attention. Spent ten minutes in the newspaper this week, and you know that the world needs our attention and our prayers. So, my Christian friends, don't be too harsh on yourself when you cannot see Jesus right away. But also, don't completely dismiss the urgency of this story. Maybe it's just the kick that we need to help us see God right in front of us. Amen.