

## **“Our Belief in God’s Ability To Set Things Right”**

**Matthew 25:1–13**

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In this month’s issue of *The Christian Century*, Dorothy Sanders Wells, rector of St. George’s Episcopal Church in Germantown, Tennessee, just outside Memphis, documents the link between our Gospel lesson today and the American Negro spiritual, “Keep Yo’ Lamps Trimmed and A-burnin’.” Enslaved people sang songs based on the religious tradition of the very people who had stripped them of their identities, traditions, and homes — a mystifying reality, Sanders Wells, who is African-American, notes. Yet in sacred texts like Jesus’ parable about the ten bridesmaids, they found something hopeful, a sign of a better day sure to come, a time when God would set things right.

Sanders Wells also notes that some scholars think spirituals like this may have had hidden meaning. “Keep yo’ lamps trimmed and a-burnin’... the time is drawin’ nigh” might have been a cue that it was time to escape. *That* time is drawin’ nigh. Just as the Israelites readied themselves the night before they left Egypt, enslaved people in this land prepared to flee to a stop along the Underground Railroad on the way to freedom by singing this song. But on both levels, a kind of hope is expressed: for freedom in this world and God’s eternal realm in the next.

Hope comes in different forms, even in sacred tradition. One form is prophetic, it involves human effort in response to God’s call to make the world better. The other is apocalyptic, it involves a dramatic intervention by God to set things right, like Jesus’ return as presented in our parable. The latter form is more common in contexts of suffering and persecution where no prophetic hope seems possible, like the Roman Empire in which Jesus lives, like what slaves faced in this nation for hundreds of years. To this day, in third-world nations, in contexts of poverty and violence, apocalyptic hope is popular because there seems to be no basis for prophetic hope. But most of us have not lived in such a context, and thus we have little interest in the apocalyptic.

So, what do we do with a text like today's reading from Matthew 25? Does it have anything to say to us? I must think it does or else I wouldn't be preaching on it. We need to explore the text more carefully while considering the challenges of our time, but this teaching is still part of our tradition, and prophetic hope alone doesn't seem adequate for much of what we face today. We need another kind of hope to sustain us, a basic belief in God's ability to set things right, even if we can't.

One thing that is clear in this text and all others that in any way refer to an end time or to Christ's return is that the point is not to try to predict exactly when it will happen. In the parable, ten bridesmaids take their lamps and go to meet the bridegroom who represents Jesus at his return. Five are wise and five are foolish, we'll explore why shortly, but whatever one group does right and the other wrong as they all await the arrival of the bridegroom, the parable ends with this commentary, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." This kind of statement appears whenever Jesus talks about an end time. No one knows when it will be, not even him.

And yet, so many people not just today but in every time seem obsessed with predicting when it will be. It seems crazy to us, and in fact, it is often more than crazy, it is downright dangerous. As Charles Kimball noted a couple Wednesday nights ago, there are apocalyptic extremists who not only think they know when Christ will return and the world as we know it will end, they think they can hasten the day by pushing for war in Israel or by making a certain kind of sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem. They read about specific events that are named as precursors of the end and attempt to make these events happen as a way of forcing God's hand.

But God will not be forced into action, and the text says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." The point is not to try to predict exactly when it will happen, when Christ will return, when God will intervene in a dramatic way to set things right.

Another thing that is clear in this text is that a delay in Christ's return, no matter how we understand it, is expected, and thus

preparedness is called for as we wait. In the parable, the bridesmaids go out with their lamps to meet the bridegroom, but he is delayed, which in the context of ancient marriage rituals, is not unusual. The groom would often bargain for the bride's price, arguing for higher value. But this bridegroom, Jesus, has now delayed nearly 2,000 years, if we are to take this promise seriously, which creates an even greater challenge.

But no matter how we understand the parable and the idea of Jesus' return, it is clear that a delay is anticipated, God is not intervening right away, and thus the faithful need to know how to proceed. Here it is women. In the next parable, it will be men. Jesus often balances stories about men with stories about women to demonstrate the need for both in God's realm. How are the faithful to proceed? Five bridesmaids are wise and five are foolish. The difference is that the wise bridesmaids take enough oil for their lamps, they are prepared for whatever comes, they keep their lamps trimmed and a-burnin'.

The calling is to preparedness. It's not really alertness, though the commentary of the final verse does use this term. But all ten bridesmaids fall asleep. No one is chastised for this. It's not having enough oil, not being prepared, that is the problem. The question is — how do we prepare, what does oil represent for us?

In scripture, oil is often a symbol for the Spirit, a kind of empowerment. It is used in services of blessing and acts of healing. In the book of Revelation, oil is a symbol of spiritual substance and strength that comes from God's word which nourishes and prepares the believer to endure to the end (Smyth and Helwys Commentary on Matthew, Ben Witherington III, pp. 460-461). And both of these meanings could apply here. We prepare for God's ultimate intervention, Christ's glorious return, by nurturing our spirits with God's Spirit and feeding our souls with the wisdom of Holy Scripture.

But there is another possibility. The lamps were used not to find the bridegroom in the ancient wedding feast but to serve him when he arrived, lighting the way for him and perhaps even performing a ritual dance in celebration of the union. The implication would be that the best way to be prepared for the return of the Christ is by being faithful to Jesus' teachings about service and love.

I have shared with some of you the story of Sister Phoebe in Calvin Miller's book *The Philippian Fragment*. In this tale about a mythical early church, the women at the scroll study are consumed with the question, "Will Jesus come before the great tribulation or after it?" Thirty-two women have voted pre and thirty-two women have voted post and the ladies want Phoebe to break the ghastly deadlock.

Phoebe refuses. It is partly a matter of not wanting to have the weight of the Lord's return squarely on her shoulders, but it is mostly a matter of her energy being placed elsewhere, being poured out in ministry to a colony of lepers.

As Phoebe heads out to her work, someone asks, "Don't you care about the end of the world, Phoebe?" "A little," she says, "But I have decided to help the lepers today." The person asks, "Is our Lord coming back before or after the tribulation? When he comes back, where do you want to be found — in this state of indecision or at the Second Coming study?" "There is where I want to be found," says Phoebe, pointing to a circle of low thatched huts where the lepers live.

There is where we want to be found whenever and however Christ returns — not trying to predict exactly when it will happen but serving people in need, as Jesus has taught us to do. That's being prepared, that's having enough oil, that's keeping our lamps trimmed and a-burnin'!

But there is at least one other thing our text tells us, perhaps the most important thing — no matter how long the delay, God in Christ will eventually come and set things right. In the parable, there is no question that the bridegroom will come. We don't know when it will happen, nor do we really know how, we just know that it will.

In the reading from 1 Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul describes in great detail the sequence of resurrection. It's the closest thing we find in scripture to the "Beam me up, Scottie" view of the Second Coming some espouse. But there are other perspectives on how resurrection works in scripture, and other views of Christ's return. We are talking about great mysteries that are too large for human comprehension. So, multiple images are needed, and none should be taken too literally.

The critical insight is that, even if we cannot see any way forward from a human perspective, we always have hope for a better world because we believe in God's ability to set things right. We don't know exactly what the return of Christ looks like. Some believe it is already happening in the pursuit of love and justice by Christ's followers. What we know is that we have cause for hope.

The question is — how do we hold on to it, how do we maintain our belief that God will set things right? It does not depend upon resolving the debate about when Christ will return. And it's not simply a matter of willing ourselves to believe, like Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz" clicking her heels together and saying, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home." It's related to the matter of preparedness we have already considered.

It's about deepening our relationship with God because the better we know God, the more we trust God with the future. It's about practicing habits of faith, whether we are invested in them every moment or not. It's about working for justice and peace, whether we believe we are getting anywhere or not. It's about acting like we believe we can make a difference until we realize that, in God's grace, we can.

A wonderful ministry like Toy Joy, helping roughly 900 children and their families know the joy of Christmas, illustrates this dynamic. We may wonder what difference we can make in a world of more needs than we can fathom. We may question whether God is ever going to intervene on behalf of the suffering poor. But when we perform simple acts of love, we see movement toward God's design, and we strengthen our belief in God's ability to make a difference. Toy Joy is just one way we do this. There are many others from the clothing ministry and the give-back food truck to work on Habitat houses and partnership mission trips. In all these ways, we see movement toward God's design, and we realize that one way God intervenes in this world is through us.

We may still not have much interest in apocalyptic thinking. But we do need a kind of hope that transcends human possibility. And that hope is based in a basic belief in God's ability to set things right. If we keep our lamps trimmed and a-burnin', we will maintain that belief!