

23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.8.20

Amos 5:18-24

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹ as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰ Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? ²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 25:1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." ⁹ But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." ¹² But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

In Godly Play, the first thing you do is get ready. The Godly Play teacher will even ask all the students, "Are you ready?" As all approach the threshold into the Godly Play space—the doorway into the classroom or the step into the circle—the teacher will ask the students one by one as they file in, "Are you ready?"

"Yes," they answer, the question itself making even the smallest, wiggliest kids focus, if just for a minute.

Funny that not all of them ask what's obvious to ask, "Ready for what?"

It's the logical response, right?

Godly Play, as many of you know, is the Montessori-based method for teaching stories of the Bible and of the Christian faith to children. The Sunday School programs in both Lenox and

Monterey are Godly Play. We use it in worship for adults in Monterey once a month, on the third Sunday—or did before COVID made such intimate gathering into a circle a risky behavior.

“Are you ready?”

(“Ready for what?”)

Those who would be teachers of Godly Play, when receiving training about how to do it will often have this as their first question after experiencing a Godly Play session, “Ready for what?” Because how can you get ready for something if you don’t know what that something is? Getting ready for going to the grocery store, for example, involves different things than getting ready for going on vacation in Disney World. “There’s no bad weather, only bad gear,” goes the saying we’ve tested each week with our outdoor worship. But coupled with this is that good gear goes with good getting ready for what you’ve learned is coming—which means you really have to know what’s coming.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” because otherwise it’s too incomplete a question to make any sense.

The thing is, there seems to be some scriptural precedent for this sort of open-ended readiness—this sort of open-ended readiness being something kids can get with more than grown-ups can. In the Old Testament, it’s often the case that the Lord calls out to someone and comes the answer, “Ready.” It’s more often translated into English, “Here I am.” But the response in Hebrew is just one word, “Hineni!” so it would better be translated into just one word, “Ready.”

This is what my professor in divinity school thought—Jon Levenson, Hebrew Bible scholar, professor of Jewish Liturgical Year, and Orthodox Jew himself. Aside from the more accurate brevity of the response, he also thought it’d be more in keeping with the spirit of the response if it were less about place (“Here I am.”) and more about posture or attitude. (“Ready!”) After all, the Lord wasn’t asking those whom called about where they were but about how they were or even whether they were.

“Abraham?”

“Ready!”

“Jacob!”

“Ready.”

Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Ananias? All ready.

Ready for what?

For whatever the Lord had next to tell them, or to ask of them, or to command them. And who could guess what that would be? Nonetheless, “Ready.”

This parable Jesus told about readiness isn't an easy one. It is in fact one of the harder ones he's remembered to have told. We've heard a lot of his tough parables lately, these mostly remembered in the Gospel of Matthew, and mostly remembered to have been stories Jesus told in the last week of his life. We're coming to the end of the church year, which means we're coming to the end of the gospel we've been following, which means in this Year A, whose end we're nearing, we're coming to the end of Matthew's remembering of Jesus' life. As such, we're hearing the angriest version of Jesus, as Matthew's version is, at the edgiest time of Jesus' life, as this last week and final chapter certainly are. And this parable is emblematic of that.

There's some difference, though, in what seems to angering Jesus here, which suggests also something different in what was angering Matthew here.

Usually, it's the religious authorities.

Remember, Matthew was writing for Christian congregations in Jerusalem around the year 80 or 90. Here and by now, Jews and Jewish-Christians had begun to realize there would be no end to the other. Jews could no longer assume this new way was but a phase, this thinking that Jesus was the Messiah but a phase that would fade. These so-called followers in the way, these more and more called Christians, were here to stay. Likewise, Christians could less and less assume that Jews would all convert to this new way, would simply accept what was so obviously the case, that Jesus, resurrected, was the Messiah, the anointed one of God. For all this, Jews would expel Jewish-Christians from the synagogues, as they less and less had a rightful place there. But this only further alienated them from one another.

Divorce isn't always an easy solution.

Civil strife, the hard entrenchment of alienation within one nation, is a hard thing to deal with. We would know, right? Though the election results come as good news to many of us, the election itself revealed some deep trouble for us a society. Two parallel tracks we seem to be on, and each group waiting for the other to come to their senses.

Meanwhile, Rome was bearing down like never before, continuing in their so-called War Against the Jews, a sixty-year campaign that left over a million dead, Jerusalem destroyed, and the

Temple pulled apart stone by stone. The Jewish religious authorities did what they could to keep Rome happy, which involved placating the imperial authorities, sometimes even doing their bidding, and keeping the people in line. And *this* involved being all the more punishing toward those Christians—the ones whom Rome would really hate, with their secret piety and their unseen refusal to accept the imperial cult; these ones whose new ways would bring Rome down on the whole city harder still.

Christians were scapegoats in Rome's Jerusalem, just as Jews have been almost everywhere in the 1900 years ever since—so maybe it's time we take a hard look at the whole scapegoat mechanism.

Matthew, for his part, had long taken up the prophetic tradition of being less impressed with religious practice than he was impressed by the doing of justice. Matthew, indeed, had little tolerance for the rectitude of the Pharisees, the strict ideology of the Sadducees, the erudition of the scribes, the cruel piety of the chief priests—those holders of order while everything went to hell, those keepers of strict ritual as if this would establish peace. Matthew wanted to see the effects of their religious confessions, the manifestation of their faithfulness. He wanted justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I imagine Matthew, perhaps most of all our four gospel writers, believed Amos' understanding of the Day of the Lord fully. That the Lord coming wasn't as when your best friend is coming over for tea. It was something far more ferocious than that—when all the time you've dithered away comes to be seen as what it was, when all the luxury you've spent on yourself comes to be revealed as but hideously self-indulgent.

Because, if God comes with true justice, then this world's but partial justice will be revealed as just that, and God's coming will be painful for those of us who've come quite to enjoy the fruits of this but partial justice. Really, if the Lord's arrival among us involves a setting of all things to right, then our getting comfortable with so much that's wrong will make it all the more a rude awakening.

On the other hand, if we practice justice now, we'll understand the blessings of that now, so the arrival of that eventuality will come as relief.

Truly, our own redemption will be as gracious or as painful a process as our need for redemption is deep and profound.

I imagine Matthew identified with this prophetic tradition. What's more, I imagine this is the aspect of Jesus that Matthew also identified with. It was Jesus' fury for justice that convicted Matthew in the Jesus way—and for this, he was more and more disgusted by the religious authorities, the ones whom he'd once trusted; and in pursuit of this, he wrote his gospel, that generations to come would know the Jesus he knew. Righteous, angry, insisting upon justice, this Jesus whom Matthew knew, though true, also tells as much about Jesus as it does about Matthew.

But that's always the case: the Jesus any of us confesses as Christ is the one whom we each both need and identify with.

Tell me who Christ is to you, and I'll tell you what you long for and what you reject.

You could do the same for me. Our Christology tells us a lot—about Jesus and perhaps more so about ourselves.

This time, though, Matthew's righteous anger is pointed in another direction. Not the religious authorities—those hypocrites, those blind guides—but the people who'd begun to give up, the people in his congregation who'd begun to flag in their expectation that Jesus was coming: these were the ones whom Matthew was addressing through this, Jesus' address about the bridesmaids.

That the advent of Christ was yet upon them, that though the end of Jesus among us is upon us in the gospel narrative, this the 25th chapter of 28 chapters, this is not to be felt as the end of the story, the time when we can shut the book, put it back on the shelf, and go back to our normal, mundane lives with our normal, mundane expectations of accepting what's good enough, eking out a life for ourselves and worrying about our little circle of concern while the rest of the world does, well, whatever. No! The story isn't over. It is yet to be written—with their lives, those gathered with Jesus during the last week of his life, those gathered in Matthew's congregations who'd begun to lose faith.

He would return, right?

Because he had come—the eternal come into time. But then he had gone—the eternal somehow killed amidst time. Crucified! But then he had come again—risen from death, though still wounded by death so clearly having died, though now seen alive. But then was gone again—ascended to heaven, on a cloud. (That's what some people said they saw!)

All of which means he'll surely come again, right?

So, don't stop your waiting. Don't relax your expectation—though (apparently) what we're expecting to come is taking longer in the coming than we'd expected (fifty years now, Matthew might well have had heavy on his mind). Don't be like the foolish bridesmaids, the ones who didn't have what it took to wait deep into the night. Be like the wise bridesmaids, the ones who had what it took to wait deep into the night, so that when the arrival occurred, they were there and ready.

Really, the parable makes perfect sense in its historical context—the year 80 or 90, while the city around them burned, the empire that enfolded them attacked, their brother and sisters rejected and cast out, and Christ was little to be found but whose advent among them was surely the whole point. It makes sense, too, in its storied context, Jesus telling the people that they should prepare themselves for a longer wait, though for what they could only hardly even imagine. But does it make sense for us?

“Are you ready?” I'm asking you, “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” you answer.

I'm not waiting for Jesus to return in any way that's similar to how he first occurred in history—as a man, a teacher, a prophet, an apostate. And I'm not waiting for him to return in any way that's similar to how he later occurred in history—as a resurrected presence, fully embodied though having died. And I'm not even waiting for him to come on a cloud, the strange means by which he's remembered to have departed from among us—though that might occur, for who am I to decide?

But none of this is to say I don't expect him to occur in time, in the living of my days, on the spur of any given moment. I do. I do expect Christ to occur. I do expect God to be present and revealed among us.

The fact that I can't say for certain how this happen, what it will look like, how it will present itself, shouldn't be heard as a lack of faithfulness, though there are some Christians who would hear as just that. Because none of this strange series of events was anything the people expected in exactly the way it all happened. And yet it all happened, contrary to much expectation, contrary to most of what people assumed. This is the trick of faith—to be open to what's not expected, and yet was is clearly good; seeing and receiving of what is totally surprising, and yet is profoundly good.

It might be felt as painful, for its violating our expectations.

It might be felt as punishing, for its rejection and overturning of what life we've made for ourselves amidst this world of sin.

And as for me, I've made a pretty good life for myself. I have nice things. I've secured a nice future. I have a new rug, and I'm happy about that; and a new sofa for my living room is on the way. But all this falls short of what is truly desirable—justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

To wait for Christ is a pin-pricking.

It is also a looking past whatever arrives at any given moment, a looking deeper at what seems to present itself as all there is. What opportunity a moment opens a way for, what chance some circumstance offers up: are you ready? Remember, unless we become as children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That's Jesus talking, according to Matthew. So, are you ready?

“Ready for what?” you ask.

Yes, exactly that.

Thanks be to God.