



Roanoke, Virginia  
December 11, 2022

## **“Watch”**

*Part III of the Sermon Series “While We Are Waiting”*

*Matthew 25:1-13*

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*Interesting.*

In the Gospels, Jesus is quite capable of harsh criticism, even condemnation..., but almost always of men. The parable I am going to read is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus offers anything that could be called harsh criticism of women. Some might peek over the fence to John’s Gospel and suggest that Jesus is a wee bit critical of the Samaritan woman at the well. But what some hear as criticism, I hear as Jesus showing empathy. Regardless, the way Jesus affirms and empowers the Samaritan woman far overwhelms any criticism offered.

Is only with *The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins*, or better, *The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids*, where Jesus is harsh. Jesus just doesn’t seem that interested in stories that cast women in a bad light... perhaps because Jesus knew of the unlevel living field of his culture and wasn’t keen in doing what is too often done by others who choose the vulnerable to pick on or to be the butt of their jokes.

Listen for the praise and criticism of the parable about wise and foolish waiting—wise and foolish watching—and listen for the Word of God.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, <sup>4</sup> but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ <sup>7</sup> Then all those young



women got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' <sup>9</sup> 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.' <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Later the other young women came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' <sup>12</sup> But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' <sup>13</sup> Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

In a strange way, Jesus is taking an equal-rights, equal-opportunity, stand here for after he tells this parable with wise and foolish *women*, he tells another parable with wise and foolish *men*. He tells of a master entrusting money to three servants to invest. To manage the money wisely and return a profit. One squanders his opportunity to do something productive and buries his money.

The parable with women and the parable with men have different points to make.

The one with men

is about wise action and foolish inaction.

The one with women

is about wise and foolish waiting.

One might think of

the first being about ethics

and the second being about spirituality.

Still, the parables are paired to contrast honor and dishonor. Paired as they are, they give equal opportunity for women and men to consider wisdom and foolishness.

So, what about those bridesmaids? And what are the torches all about?

I'll share some insights from what I've studied, but I'll start with something I experienced. I was one of those bridesmaids once. Well, actually, I was a groomsman, but I had the kind of experience they were anticipating. My brother, Mark, was in a field facing Jill, at a beautiful, broken-down retreat in Massachusetts. Jill's family had rented the whole place. Mark in his kilt and Jill in Irish green exchanged vows and were pronounced husband and wife. Then came a recessional from the wedding service that became a procession to the wedding banquet as a bagpiper led the wedding party through the woods to where dancing and feasting awaited us. Only the dancing could not wait because the walk through the woods was magical. The whole wedding party, and then the guests behind us, danced the entire half mile to where we would eat, celebrate, and dance again.

It is this sort of procession that awaits the bridesmaids once the bridegroom arrives. In telling his parable, Jesus draws on a well-known tradition he does not need to explain. They know how cool it is for the evening of a magical wedding day to begin with a procession, torches lighting the way with their light dancing in the night. It is often the case that the bridesmaids would dance once they arrive at the venue and before entering. Based on my experience in Massachusetts, I bet that often the dancing cannot wait. The procession is something a bridesmaid would not want to miss.



It takes some stamina though and requires some rest. Wedding festivities in Jesus' day could last the *better part of a week*, often taking place in Autumn when families and the community can gather after the demands of harvest let up and the evenings are cool. A great deal of preparation takes place before the wedding week, and several days of preparation take place during the wedding week before this procession takes place. Now the wedding is over, but the groomsman hasn't arrived. Musicians are ready, food awaits, and all there is to do now is watch. Nothing is needed now... except enough oil for the lamps.

Enough oil. It is not safe for bridesmaids to wait in the dark and so lamps must burn while the bridesmaids wait. This should not be a surprise. This is common sense. When the bridegroom arrives is not a set thing (I hope I don't have to tell you why he might be delayed but it has to do with this marriage being official).

So, there really is no excuse for some of the bridesmaids not to have extra oil on hand. But five are not prepared, and Jesus lets them have it. They are locked out when it is time to feast and dance inside.

Let's go back to the parable about wise and foolish men. In that parable, *waiting is condemned*. A manager is condemned for not managing. It is a *Wednesday Parable* about working instead of waiting.

Our parable is a *Sabbath Parable*. The bridesmaids are right to *wait*. They are not even criticized for *sleeping*. This isn't like the disciples falling asleep when they are supposed to be praying with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. No, the wedding week is a lot to manage and for them to sleep while they can is good. The bridesmaids are doing what the Sabbath command calls us to do: wait and rest.

But there is a big difference between one set of bridesmaids and the other. The difference is preparation.

How fun will Christmas be if the tree hasn't been trimmed or presents wrapped? How fun will it be if the refrigerator and pantry is not stocked for the Christmas meal? Have you ever tried to do your Christmas shopping on Christmas Eve or waited to the last minute to put something together assuming that the words on the box can be trusted, "[Easy Assembly?](#)" I've been there. I know all about my joy being robbed as I make way through crowded stores staring at empty shelves or lose precious hours of sleep putting something together, and then, when I am done, wonder why there are still parts lying on the floor. (Do I tell Millie about this, or do I act like I've got it under control and let Paige ride this thing and hope for the best?)

Two kinds of waiting; and preparation is the difference.

Or, to de-secularize my point,  
how meaningful is a Christmas Eve worship service  
if you don't know the stories,  
if you don't know that the good news of Christ's coming  
has nothing to do with the privileges of money  
and the glitter and tinsel of make-believe,  
but has everything to do with God becoming flesh—



God meeting us in our mortality,  
in our need,  
and even in our sin—  
leaving us not abandoned outside with the door locked,  
but welcoming us into a banquet of grace?

I know, I just changed the parable. Whether one has prepared or not prepared, the good news proclaimed at a Christmas Eve service is about God's unconditional love and amazing grace. Take seriously the news that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self, and now the bridesmaids are not locked out but the Father of the bride took mercy and unlocked the door letting them in. That's the Gospel.

But we have to take the parable seriously because Jesus told it, and Jesus is talking about something real. There is something to being prepared, for amazing grace or being numb to it.

There is famous story of Joshua Bell, a renounced violinist, performed in 2007 the first movement of Bach's Violin Concerto and nobody who heard it enjoyed what they heard. They were not prepared for the musical feast. They were not watching for this. They had not bought tickets in advance. They did not look forward to the arrival the day of the concert. They did not dress up, go to a concert hall and sit in the auditorium waiting for the curtain to rise. There was not that period of hushed and expectant silence before Bell began to play. Unadvertised and unidentified, Bell masterfully played the piece in Washington's Union Station... and everyone rushed on by to get to where they were going, missing the beauty offered them. They were not prepared for Bell to play, for the bridegroom to arrive.

There is a reason for all that we do during Advent to prepare for Christmas Eve—  
the Advent devotions and calendars,  
the Calls to Worship and the lighting of candles,  
the liturgy and the sermons,  
the reading of passages about who it is that we are waiting for—  
watching for—  
passages about who is coming  
and why there is a celebration and feast when that one arrives.

When the Christmas Eve service finally arrives, our doors are not locked, the worship experience is available to all who come. But I have to think that the service is experienced differently by those who come because it's what you do,

those who see the service as something to get through,  
to get to the fun of Christmas...,  
like rushing past a virtuoso violinist,  
and those who see that the service is about the point of it all—  
that we are not left alone,  
but that one is coming who will lead us to the banquet  
where there is finally nothing to do but feast and dance.



I don't want to sound like that minister who thinks that our traditions of Christmas are themselves what Christmas is all about. As much as I love our Christians traditions, and Christmas Eve service, they are not the point. Christmas is celebrated differently in other places. Our traditions are meant to do what traditions are meant to do; point beyond themselves to God among us... to help us look beyond *ourselves* to recognize God among us.

And, in telling his parable, Jesus wouldn't want his listeners to think that he is simply talking about the traditions of weddings, and about making sure you have enough oil for your lamps. He is talking about the spiritual life—and particularly about how we can prepare for when some faithful witness is required of us.

He could just as easily tell a parable about

- The waiting that comes with going to school
  - and the difference between those who want to pass the classes
  - and those who want to learn and prepare for life;
- The waiting that comes with loss and grief
  - and the difference between those who are trying to get past it
  - and those who want to get through it to heal;
- The waiting that comes with conflict
  - and the difference between those trying to win, or at least survive,
  - and those seeking to reconcile.

It is the interior work of waiting he is speaking of; the ways we can prepare to recognize the signs of God.

- Prayer that listens more than speaks
  - so, one might actually
    - gain insight,
    - find comfort,
    - or accept what cannot be changed.
- Learning the stories of scripture and the wisdom of the church
  - so, one might, when the moment comes, know better what to do when something graceful needs to be done.
- Attending to the duties of devotion to God,
  - So one can better attend to the devotion of others.

When the opportunity comes to turn away wrath and answer cruelty with kindness, do you know what kindness looks like in conflict?

Or when a friend or a neighbor is hurt or crushed by tragedy, will you have any idea of how to respond, or will you run out of oil by staying away, or by trying to answer what cannot be explained or provide a solution when it is understanding and compassion that is needed.



Will you be ready to find what is possible within limitations when limitations become real—to love after loss, to know you are worthy when you can no longer work.

The banquet that Jesus describes is life with God beyond the limits of life now lived. It is that realm of God where sins are forgiven, and enemies are reconciled. It is that day beyond all days, but which can also be today, when we know that God is with us and all things will be well in him.

It is a banquet to prepare for because we don't want to be without oil now or later when it is time to bear the torch and dance. Foolish bridesmaids want what they will not ready themselves for. Can we not learn from the wise bridesmaids? Can we not prepare to be who we need to be when it is time to pick up the torch and follow?

