

Sermon for Sunday 8 November 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7 (*insert*); 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

"Be prepared!"

The great 19th century preacher, Phillips Brooks, reflected that the best sermons are preached by pastors in small churches faithfully plugging away. That's a dreadful challenge to us ordinary gals and guys! The only truth I can glean from it is that you all who faithfully show up Sunday after Sunday hoping against hope for a word from the Lord are sometimes rewarded for your faithfulness! The door opens, the bridegroom invites you in, and here we all are.

Seriously, when you've lived with these texts from youth into old age, as I have, it's hard to know where to start counting the riches ... much less to stop.

First we have the Jews reminding themselves how special they are ... The commentators point out that this story of Joshua's last moments comes from many sources, but the last version most likely dates from their time in captivity in Babylon, when they've lost everything for being special ... and there they are, rooted in a contract they keep breaking, with a Divine Friend who keeps making up with them ... It's the only way we've ever found how to complete the story.

Then we have Psalm 78, which insists we stick with the contract because that's the only way our children and their children's children will know how we got here, much less how to stay on course with our chosen destiny; then we read Paul reassuring all these pagans who came into the church without clear ideas about life beyond death, so they worried when some passed on before Jesus returned ... Paul assures them the God who raised Jesus will certainly raise all the rest of us ... and ever since, we've been hoping he's right and that's the way it works out. Period.

Where do I start producing useful information for 21st-century Jesus-junkies like us from this ancient, pieced-together, self-contradicting material preserved through the ages?

What I CAN say, in all my little-guy-in-the-non-famous-pulpit moxy, is that every one of these texts invites serious conversation about real issues. What DOES God really want? How come we never can hide for long from standing out, about true dealings with others, or with ourselves? What do our children depend on us for, really? If these texts, and my reflections about them, get you thinking seriously, even for a small period each day, grace may show up, someway, and you may learn, and expand, and claim your joy.

But the title scripture, the fable of the wise and foolish virgins, that starts us on the last section of Matthew's Gospel, and the close of Jesus' story, needs attention. This is, after all, chapter 25. The commentary reminds us that there are no more speeches to crowds now. Jesus narrows his audience down to a few treasured friends, as he ... or as Matthew edits the then-available collection of facts about Jesus ... as the Bible sums it up. We're now down to the

bone about what Jesus was remembered for. In these last few Sundays of the year in which we mostly read the Gospel according to Matthew, time is short. There's just a little to point out before the scenery falls and the disciples run for cover and the cross stands waiting.

Here again, life is so ordinary ... this is so typical How do I make it useful for us, for me, for you, this week, what's awesome yet O so typically real about reality?

I live in a neighborhood built up from farms and fields somewhere between a hundred and a hundred and fifty years ago. That means that by the time I settled here, in 1967, generations had come and gone. Lots of houses were by then broken up into apartments, many filled with Hopkins students.... But after we got into ours, and I got a real estate license and began to promote this as an ideal location for young families to start in, I found several others were also still single-family homes. And now, all these years later, living alone in my three-story 1897-vintage rowhouse, I identify with all those widows and spinsters and elderly couples living alone back then. Often in homes their parents had lived in, and they themselves had been in since childhood. I don't know if they, or I, can classify as the wise virgins of the neighborhood... but somehow they felt comfortable staying there in their old age, as I now do, prepared, benefitting from those who went before us, to live well in our remaining years, please God.

That's what I see before us as Americans, and indeed, as humans, these days. We've got maybe eight more years to do something about global warming. We're teetering on the precipice of nuclear destruction if we don't agree to outlaw nuclear weapons. Someone said if we all gave up meat and turned the land livestock use into forests, planting trees, we could stop global warming in less than ten years. Someone else says if you build a wind-farm far enough out in the North Atlantic, you could produce sufficient renewable energy for the whole North American continent. Lots of signs are emerging this year that, unless we make race a non-item in our life together, and unless you drop patriarchy out of the equation between humans, and start respecting the animal and vegetable and mineral aspects of creation as much as we do the human element, the door is soon to close on everything we call life. The signs are clear, from virus to weather. So, here goes: If you and I want to say and hear something useful in church, it's going to be as ordinary as that little piece about, "Everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten." You know how it goes. I'll just start quoting: *Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.*"

It starts with us, folks. The rest of the story is back there where we began calling ourselves special, and over time that made all the sense in the world, in life, in death, in everything. Now that needs editing, and the Divine in all things is showing us clearly. Our version of reality has got to connect with the science, and the social testimony, and the signs and intuitions that have been here all along, which we've just begun to pay attention to. ... some of it this very year ... That's all the preparation we need; but without it, the door will slam and nothing will amount to anything. That's not because God comes fast or slow. It's because we're ready, or not.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

