

## KEEPERS OF THE FLAME

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
November 8, 2020

Psalm 78:1-7  
Matthew 25:1-13

All my life, I have had a tendency to procrastinate. No matter how much lead time I have on a project, I invariably seem to put it off until the last minute. That made for a lot of all-nighters in college and more than a few “just-in-time” presentations to business clients. Even today, without the pressure to record them early for our Zoom sessions, I would rarely finish writing a sermon until Sunday morning.

I’ve almost convinced myself that I do my best work under the pressure of a looming deadline. But I’m not sure I really believe that in my heart-of-hearts. I’ve had this recurring dream since I became a preacher. I am processing into a crowded church to the swelling strains of an opening hymn, but as I reach the chancel, I realize that my sermon is not ready. Is my psyche trying to tell me something?

Deep down we know that time is never on our side, though we tend to live as if it is. The *urgent* often claims the lion’s share of our attention, while the *necessary* seems almost always to wait until the eleventh hour. Our lives are an endless, creative game of putting off and catching up, pushing back and pulling in, killing time and buying time. As the sun sets and darkness falls on another day of our lives, we make the bold assumption that tomorrow will always come, and rarely are we surprised that it does.

How much time do we have to do what must be done in our lives? Jesus said we have enough. He said we have more than enough time. But as we’ve heard in this morning’s lesson from Matthew’s gospel, he also said it’s what we do, or don’t do, with the time we are given that becomes our greatest obstacle to the extraordinary inheritance of the kingdom of God.

He tells this story on what we know was one of his last few days of life. When you know your days are numbered, as Jesus did, you cut to the chase and tell it like it is; you say what must be said, even if it hurts, because there may not be another opportunity in which to say it. And it’s that sense of urgency, I suppose, that makes this such a hard word to hear and so seemingly contrary to the gospel of grace that dominates our perception of Jesus. The door to the Kingdom seems always to be open: prodigals are welcomed home, the lost sheep are sought out and brought back into the fold, sinners find forgiveness, even tax collectors and prostitutes are given a place at the table. We fall in love with the Jesus who is patient and long-suffering, who waits and waits and seems to give us all the time we need to get it right and finally come around.

Then Jesus broadsides us with a parable about the door slamming shut while we are still outside, and we discover that the grace of God apparently has a conscience. Scholars suggest Matthew may have recalled this story of Jesus’ for his community of faith when its passion for Christ had grown cold, when its light had begun to fade. Maybe

Matthew saw his people going through the motions while quietly wondering if Jesus would ever return for them, as he promised them he would. When Matthew was writing his gospel down, you remember, it had been more than forty years since that promise, and there was still no sign of Jesus' imminent homecoming. Maybe Matthew's people were tired of waiting; maybe they were skeptical; maybe they were afraid that Nero's scouts would sniff them out and feed them to the lions or saw them in two. Whatever the problem was, Matthew felt it was time to tell them a little story that Jesus told his disciples three days before he was crucified, hoping to rekindle in them the flames of faith and inspire them to keep alert, to stay awake, to continue doing the work Jesus left for them to do.

It was not a feel-good kind of story, by the way. It was, rather, a sobering story about ten bridesmaids who grab their lamps and head out to the roadside, waiting for the bridegroom to pick them up for the wedding party. All ten show up. All ten wait. And wait. And wait. They have not heard the news that the bridegroom ran into traffic on the interstate. They haven't heard that the bridegroom is going to be late. The sun sets and darkness falls; the bridesmaids light their lamps, all ten of them, and they wait. But in their waiting, five of them notice that their lamps are running out of oil. Their light begins to flicker and fade, and before they know it, their lamps go out.

Curiously, at about that same time, the best man calls to say, "We're on our way; be there in a few." Word gets out, and the five bridesmaids panic; they are fresh out of oil, and a burning lamp is their only ticket to the party. The burnouts plead with the others—"share some of your oil with us, we didn't have time to stop and buy more on our way over." But there's not enough to go around. So the five burnouts head for the hardware store, right about the same time the bridegroom's car pulls around the corner and stops in front of the banquet hall. The five remaining bridesmaids, the ones whose lamps are still lit, escort the bridegroom to the entrance. The door opens. They walk through. The door shuts. And the party begins. It's a raucous good time. So loud that no one inside can hear the five bridesmaids banging on the door in the dark night, pleading for a way in. And there they stay.

Why did Jesus tell us this story? We are apt to live our lives in this world as if there is always time to get around to doing what must be done now. Rarely do we ever pause to consider that our lives will someday come to an end, and all that we had planned on doing *someday* will have to be left undone. We set goals; we map out long-term plans; we work hard in order to retire comfortably someday. And if we do not get around to it all today, there is always tomorrow. For the average person, there are more than 26,000 tomorrows in a single lifetime. Plenty of time, right? If we don't get around to it today, there is always tomorrow, or the next day. But at some point, we run out of time.

Noah's neighbors laughed at the old man for hammering nails into planks of cypress and building a boat when the dark storm clouds gathered on the horizon. God would not hold back the rain for them. There was no tomorrow.

One day Jesus sent out the disciples to preach and teach and baptize, giving them specific instructions: "*If the people will not listen, if they reject you and refuse to let you in, then shake the dust off your feet, and move on.*" God would not wait. The invitation was revoked.

When the rich man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him straight up—“Sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and follow me.” When the rich man turned and walked away grieving, Jesus did not negotiate a more pleasant deal, nor would he wait for the man to change his mind. He moved on.

Thinking about the larger context of our lives can remind us of how many tomorrows have ticked off the clock of life, and how few tomorrows remain. The doctor sees a spot on the CT scan; your best friend dies of a sudden heart attack at the office; a natural disaster or civil unrest strikes close to home; a mushroom cloud thunders over the distant horizon. If you listen honestly, carefully, you can hear the door closing on the living all around us, and you take inventory of the oil you’ve been burning in your life, and the oil you’ve been banking.

There will not always be tomorrow. Jesus was clear about that. Life begins and life ends. There will be a day for all of us when the train will pull into the station. Jesus said, “Of that day or hour, no one knows.” You’re either prepared, or you’re not. And he said that those who are wise are those who understand that you cannot make up for lost time.

How much oil is in your spiritual lamp? Be honest about that, because when we are honest, I believe we will all of us discover that we are burning faith on old oil reserves that will some day run dry if we have not taken the time to draw deeply from the well of the One who promises to refill them.

I have heard too many people tell me over the years that they do not know why their adult children will not speak to them anymore. *If only I could go back and do what I put off over the years.* I have heard too many people tell me that they have spent their entire lives going to church and still do not know how to pray, or trust, or forgive, or love, or rest. I have sat with too many people over the years who, in the last days of life, confess that if they could do it all over again, they would slow down; give more and take less; be more generous with their love, their talents, their passions. They would store up more treasures in heaven and fewer possessions on earth. They would live the lives they’ve been given, rather than the many lives they’ve pursued in vain.

Jesus told the people one day on the mountain, “Do not worry about tomorrow—what you will eat or drink, what you will wear, what you will accomplish, who you hope to be, or what you hope to do someday. Worry instead about today. Let today’s concerns be enough.” Or, as author Kathleen Norris says, “Live each day knowing that it may be your last. Someday you’ll be right.”

*The Grapes of Wrath* is John Steinbeck’s powerful, epic story of the brutal circumstances of life in the days of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, when an estimated 200,000 people fled their drought-ravaged homesteads for the promised land of California—many of whom never made it. In the book, the Joad family pack their most essential possessions on the rear bed of their fragile jalopy, load up their family of twelve and the faithless preacher, and leave their home in Oklahoma in pursuit of a land of dreams too good to be true. As they head out of town into an uncertain, tragic future, Steinbeck gives us a glimpse of what it means to take each day, each moment as it comes:

Al steered with one hand and put the other on the vibrating gear-shaft lever. He had difficulty in speaking. His mouth formed the words silently before he said them aloud. “Ma—” She looked slowly around at him, her head swaying a little with the car’s motion. “Ma, you scared a goin’? You scared a goin’ to a new place?”

Her eyes grew thoughtful and soft. “A little,” she said. “Only it ain’t like scared so much. I’m jus’ settin’ here waitin’. When somepin’ happens that I got to do somepin—I’ll do it.”

“Ain’t you thinkin’ what’s it gonna be like when we get there? Ain’t you scared it won’t be nice like we thought?”

“No,” she said quickly. “No, I ain’t. You can’t do that. I can’t do that. It’s too much—livin’ too many lives. Up ahead they’s a thousan’ lives we might live, but when it comes, it’ll on’y be one. If I go ahead on all of ’em, it’s too much.”<sup>1</sup>

There is considerable wisdom in that. Of all the lives ahead of us, only one of them counts—the one we’re living today. That is all we can live. We cannot do more than that. Tomorrow may come. It might not. But today is here. And today is the day we are given to prepare for whatever tomorrow will bring, if indeed it comes at all. It is the oil we store up today that will keep the lights on tomorrow, in the kingdoms of this world, or in the Kingdom still to come.

Do not miss that Kingdom. Be keepers of the flame. Tend to the flame of Christ within you. Keep awake, keep alert, and let your light so shine before others that they might see your good works and give glory to the Father.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002), 124.