

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Joshua 24: 1 – 3a, 14 – 25  
 1 Thessalonians 4: 13 – 18

Ps. 78: 1 – 7  
 Matthew 25: 1 – 13

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 “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour!” Keep awake. Jesus’ words of conclusion to his parable of the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids.

In just three weeks, we begin Advent, a time of preparation, where one of the themes is “keep awake,” be watching and waiting for the coming of God. We’ll probably even sing the hymn, *Wachet Auf!* – Sleepers Wake! There is a current slang word, “Woke,” that is getting a lot of press these days. It has an interesting background (derives from “awake”), but basically it refers to being socially aware. As in raising a ‘woke’ child. In the last few years, it has also come to imply not just awareness, but action.

“Keep awake,” the conclusion of the parable in Matthew’s Gospel is related to a parable in the Gospel of Mark (13:35). The very same word in Greek, ????????, is used by both evangelists. In Mark, the word is translated as “Keep awake.” But in Matthew’s Gospel, both the wise and the foolish bridesmaids fall asleep, so that can’t be quite the right meaning in this context. Matthew’s understanding of being a responsible and faithful disciple does *not* include being constantly vigilant for the coming of the Son of God. Matthew opposes the frantic quest for information about the coming of Christ, or the day of judgment. Matthew’s portrayal of faithfulness is one of disciples going about their regular tasks of praying and serving God. They are therefore always prepared for the coming of God, at a time and place and in a manner that no one can predict. If one is being faithful in this manner, then it is okay to rest and sleep, just as the five wise bridesmaids do. For Matthew, then, it is more about being prepared than simply being awake. Maybe being ‘woke’ and active is a better translation than simply ‘keep awake.’

In Jesus’ story, the bridegroom [a.k.a. the Messiah] is delayed for an unspecified reason. For Matthew, writing to the early church about 40 years after Jesus, Jesus’ return has been delayed for unknown reasons. Many, including the apostle, Paul, thought it would be happen soon after his ascension and in the lifetime of the first disciples. But now those disciples are dying off and people wonder... In several places, Matthew lets it be known that the timing for these things is all up to God and not for us to know.

One of the attractions for predicting the end of time as we know it is that we will know when to prepare. Or, another way of looking at it is that we can slack off for a while until we think we *have* to get serious about it. But, God doesn’t wait for what we think of as the ‘end of time’ to come to us in our lives. God comes to us whenever and wherever God knows it is right. God comes to us in the present: in moments of decision and opportunity, in moments when truth is sorely needed, in moments of encounter, in moments of loss and grief, and in moments of challenge and trial. And, like all of the bridesmaids, we are often taken by surprise at God’s choice of timing. And by the time we realize, if we do, that God is present, it is too late to run out and get more oil.

So how do we get woke about God present in our lives and in the world? How do we get prepared? Being ready, being prepared, takes regular practice. Practice of worship, prayer, studying Scripture, serving God in the world. If we were fire fighters, we wouldn’t wait until the station bell clanged to learn how to use the hoses and the rest of our gear. We would be practicing daily until it was deeply engrained in us, almost like DNA. The same should be true for our relationship with God. Being

prepared for God's coming happens when, each day, we practice the presence of God in our lives. Regular worship, prayer, study and action are called spiritual disciplines for a reason – it's hard work.

In *Radically Christian, 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christianity in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century World*, blogger Wes McAdams, an ordained pastor, writes about why no one goes to church anymore. According to a 2014 survey by the Hartford Institute of Religion Research, less than 20% of Americans attend worship services every week. The reasons they give for not wanting to "go to church" are that they don't want to be lectured, and that they see the church as judgmental, hypocritical and irrelevant.

They don't want to 'go to church.' McAdams responds that at least part of the reason is that the understanding of church has gotten so convoluted in the last 2000 years. He writes, "When Christians don't understand that *they* are the church [when they see it as something external to themselves], and when they see the church as an institution which they can either choose to support or not, they lose the entire concept of Christianity."

The second problem, McAdams notes is that people see church as a weekly event to attend. "Church," he writes, "is not something Christians attend when they get a chance. The church is who Christians are...every day of the week." It isn't just semantics, he argues. Someone might say that they are 'going to church.' Sure, says McAdams, we know what they mean, but perhaps the last few generations saying it that way has contributed to the problem. "If you asked me, 'what is family?' and I said, 'Oh, that's something I attend when I come home from work,' you would look at me like I'd lost my mind," McAdams continues. "My family is not an event I attend. My family is something that I'm part of – even when I'm somewhere else." His point is, it's the same thing with being a part of the Body of Christ, the Church. He concludes, "When people see the church as either an institution to support or an event to attend, it's no wonder they see it as being irrelevant. If we want to see Christians stop checking out, we must start teaching people that *we are the church!*"

To be the wise bridesmaids then is to remember that we are the church, not just when it's convenient or when we have nothing better to do. Church is living into our baptismal vows on a daily basis. Church is what and who we are, not just something we "do", something we choose to support or attend. Church is how we are to live and move and have our being. And no one else can do it for us, as the five foolish bridesmaids discover. Being the church is being "woke" to the presence of God all around us and acting upon that. In being the Church, not just on Sundays, but every day, through worship, prayer, study of Scripture and serving God, we are made ready for the bridegroom's coming. No matter when that happens. +