Pentecost 23 A ~ November 8, 2020

Texts: Matthew 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24

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Good morning.

I am Pastor Martha Miller Sims.

I serve at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Winchester.

and as Dean of the Northern Valley Conference

of the Virginia Synod.

It is a joy to be with you.

If you are like me,

you’ve been thinking

about how to best handle living in this strange environment

of continuing to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic,

the fractious election, and cold weather,

with Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas

and a long winter ahead of us.

To ward off winter gloom,

it is good to prepare ourselves.

I read a helpful article from *Inc*., entitled,

*It’s Going to be a Long, Dark Covid Winter:*

*Scandinavian Wisdom Can Help You Get Through it.*

My nephew, Jared, and his family,

live in Norway.

When they approach winter differently than we do,

with a much more positive outlook,

that helps them thrive

in a much colder, and darker season.

As the Norwegians say,

“There’s no such thing as bad weather,

only bad clothes.”

The Danish have the concept of hygge,

sometimes translated as “coziness,”

which is more than just candlelight, warm beverages

and curling up by the fireplace,

but also a mindset;

it is about relaxing and being kind to yourself,

creating a safe, comforting and warm place

to while away cold, wet evenings,

focusing on simple pleasures.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The article suggests some helpful practices:

1. Jump-starting new routines for self-care and growth,

Like more exercise and better sleep;

1. building up your support system, even digitally;
2. and practicing arguing with your thoughts,

talking back to negative thoughts.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Are we prepared for this?

Are we ready?

Jesus’ parable in Matthew

is about being prepared for something that is critical,

the coming of the bridegroom,

the advent of God’s kingdom

in the world God created and loves.

The kingdom of heaven will be like this, Jesus says,

*Ten bridesmaids took their lamps,*

*and went to meet the bridegroom.*

This parable is one of the three last parables of Jesus

in the Gospel of Matthew,

before the account of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

All ten bridesmaids have come to the wedding,

each with a lamp full of oil.

At the beginning, we learn that five of them are foolish

and five of them are wise.

What is the difference between them?

What does it mean to be wise or foolish?

The wise bridesmaids have brought extra oil in a flask,

just in case it would be needed.

But the foolish bridesmaids have not;

they have not come prepared for the unforeseen.

As the parable unfolds,

the unforeseen happens;

the bridegroom is very late.

The bridesmaids have all fallen asleep,

and oil in their lamps runs low.

The wise bridesmaids refuse to share their oil,

because there isn’t enough for all of them.

So the foolish bridesmaids

are left to run out to the shops to buy more oil,

and while they are gone,

the bridegroom finally comes,

the door to the banquet hall is shut,

and the bridegroom himself

turns them away.

Keep watch….be prepared….be ready.

This parable was, and still is,

a call to faith,

to trust in God

and to follow the way of God’s kingdom;

to be ready for his coming

“for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

To be ready, to keep watch,

is to trust in God revealed in Christ

and to follow him;

to be his disciple;

not just for a day,

but over a lifetime,

day after day, year after year;

no matter how long we must wait for him.

If I were to summarize what we have needed in this crazy year, 2020,

in one word

it would be “resilience.”

This is a year that has required,

and is still requiring from all of us,

that we be resilient.

Each season this year,

we have hoped things would get better,

but it hasn’t happened,

and it has been critical,

for us, for our families, and for our neighbors,

to be prepared, “resilient,”

so we all can stay strong, and well.

We wear masks.

It is such a simple and profoundly efficient way

to love our neighbor.

We are exercising our God-given freedom to serve our neighbor.

We’ve found ways to stay connected with one another

while being physically distant.

We’ve learned new ways with new technologies,

to worship,

filling our homes with hymns and prayers, like never before.

We’ve found creative new ways to buy food and other necessities,

to meet with each other,

and to stay the course in mission and ministry,

to share the gospel with children,

and to serve our neighbors in need.

With God’s help,

we’ve been resilient!

And the need for that continues.

What will it mean for us in the coming months to be ready,

to be prepared for whatever is coming –

the pandemic,

a country fractured by opposing ways of viewing the world,

opposing ways of relating to neighbors,

different understandings of what it means to be racist,

different opinions about handling national and global crises,

- we are so very different in our way of thinking

than we ever imagined.

Right now as I preach and record this sermon for you,

I don’t know what election night will be like.

By the time you hear it,

we will know more.

It weighs heavily on us.

We know that we have difficulty ahead,

whatever the outcome of the election,

whenever we will finally have a vaccine for COVID-19.

But we also know that there is a bigger picture.

As people of faith

we trust that God is working in the world still,

through us,

through other people,

and beyond us.

God IS working.

How do we prepare

for the time ahead of us?

Wisdom teaches us to think and prepare for the unexpected,

to trust in God’s goodness,

ready to wait it out,

expectant and hopeful for normalcy – even if it is a new normal –

confident in a God who has compassion for the world,

for us, for all people.

We are people of hope and resilience

because we belong to God.

Yes, the call to keep watch, to be prepared,

is a call to faith;

not faith as something to have,

or statements of intellectual belief

but faith as deepening relationship with the creator of the universe,

who, through Christ offers a way for life and salvation,

in unexpected ways and opportunities.

We are saved by God’s grace;

but saved not just **from** something - sin, death, hell;

we are saved **for** something.

Jesus summed up the ten commandments in two:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

And 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

On these two commandments

hang all the law and the prophets."

Love for our neighbor

is inextricably linked with love for God.

Martin Luther said,

“God doesn’t need our good works,

but our neighbor does.”

God’s message

shared through the prophet Amos in our first reading

makes this link

between love of neighbor and love of God **clear**.

God has no interest in our praise, our worship, or our festivals,

if we aren’t living justly.

How we treat others,

our neighbors,

not just those who live on our street,

but also in other neighborhoods, near and far,

those who are in our own families,

and those who are strangers,

especially those who are different in some way from us,

and those who are vulnerable,

is very much at the heart of the gospel life,

the life of faith in Christ Jesus.

God cares about justice, about equality,

fair treatment for all people.

“Let justice roll down like water,”

God says through Amos,

“and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

This is love!

This is life!

This is salvation at work, in and through us.

Thanks be to God!

1. Harper’s Baazar. Ella Alexander, October 26, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inc. Jessica Stillman, October 29, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)