

Letting Our Light Shine

Jesus said “Keep awake. Be ready. For you know neither the day nor the hour when God will come to you.” And to reinforce the point, Jesus told a story about a wedding. Now weddings, in the villages and towns of the Galilee where Jesus grew up, were usually a pretty big deal. In the wedding customs of that time and place, the bridesmaids had a very important function in the overall festivities: it was the bridesmaids’ job to go out to meet the bridegroom and to bring him into the hall, usually the town synagogue, where the ceremony and the feast would take place. You can still see that sort of custom in some parts of the world today: the bridegroom arrives, perhaps from another town, perhaps from his father’s house, and he’s dressed in his finest clothes, and he’s riding a donkey if he can afford it, and he comes in with great dignity and presence. And the bridesmaids come out to meet him, and they sing songs, and they play tambourines, and they praise him for his beauty, and they say how eagerly the bride is waiting for him—and they bring torches, or candles, or lamps, so that they can light the way to the wedding hall and show everyone what a festive and joyous occasion it is.

The problem, though, in the story Jesus tells, is that not all the bridesmaids are ready to play their part in the festivities. Of the ten bridesmaids sent to meet the bridegroom, five of them don’t have enough oil for their lamps. When the time comes to light the bridegroom’s way, five of them find their lamps sputtering and growing dim—and instead of going in to the light and the warmth and the joy of the feast, they get left out in the dark, when midnight is past and the door is shut and all the lights go out. And, the parable implies, if we don’t want to end up like those bridesmaids, the thing for us to do is to make sure we have enough oil.

But what exactly does that mean? Commentators on this passage through the centuries have given very different interpretations of what the oil in the parable stands for. Some say that the oil is a symbol for good deeds, and the message is that we must do good in our earthly life so that we can earn our place at the heavenly banquet. Others say that the oil is a symbol for prayer and contemplation, and the message is that we must cultivate a personal holiness so that we can be holy enough to be with Jesus when he comes. Still others say that the oil is a symbol of baptism—since we are anointed with oil in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever—and the message is that only the baptized will get into heaven, so you better get baptized as quickly as you can. One way or another, though, you have to make sure you have enough oil.

But you know, the more I think about this parable, the more I think the oil isn’t really the point. The oil is only a means to an end, the oil is only an instrument for a purpose. The oil is what you need to light your lamp, and it’s the *light* that really means something. In fact this whole parable about processions and lamps and light makes me think of another saying of Jesus, from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” The point of the parable is that we must be ready to let our light shine, so that we may light the way to reveal the presence of Christ in the world. And there are many ways we can let our light shine.

One way we can let our light shine is hinted to us in our First Testament reading today. In this passage from the end of the Book of Joshua, Joshua has gathered all the people of Israel together at Shechem in order to renew their covenant with God. The people have settled in the Land of Promise, God has given them rest from all their enemies, and they have begun to settle into a new way of life. For forty years the people had been nomads, dwellers in the wilderness, following Moses wherever God led. But now the people are dwelling in villages and towns, now they are becoming farmers—and Joshua is concerned that now they might turn to the gods of farmers, to the gods their neighbors say bring the rain and make the crops grow, to the gods that seem to bring success to the surrounding culture. Joshua is concerned that the people might turn to these cultural gods and forget their devotion to Yahweh, the God of their salvation. So Joshua makes a ceremony of covenant renewal, calling the people to be faithful to the ways of Yahweh even in the midst of peoples who follow other ways.

And that same call to faithfulness is important for us today, too. Sometimes it seems like our surrounding culture promotes all sorts of things other than God for us to worship. Sometimes we are tempted to worship the almighty dollar; sometimes it seems like we worship celebrity; sometimes it’s the worship of power, or security,

or “being a winner.” But compared to all these other things, we are called to be faithful to the worship of God, we are called to be faithful to the ways of justice and peace and compassion and love revealed by God and embodied in human life in Jesus. Especially now, at this historic moment in our nation’s life, after the election on Tuesday, at the end of a bruising and often bitter presidential campaign, when Senator McCain in his concession speech and Senator Obama in his victory speech both spoke of the hard work ahead for our country and the need for people to come together to heal wounds and build up genuine community—especially now, we Christians who are also citizens are called to be faithful to the ways of right relationship for mutual well-being which have been given to us by God, and given to us by God for the good of the world. We can let our light shine in our nation by being faithful to the justice and peace of God.

Another way to let our light shine is given in our Epistle reading today, where Paul writes of the importance of hope. You see, the Christians in Thessalonika were worried because some members of their community had died without witnessing the return of Jesus. They expected that Jesus would return any day, any moment, within their own lifetime—and they were worried that those who had died *before* Jesus came back would be left out of Jesus’ kingdom. So Paul writes to assure them that life and death are no barriers to Christ’s reign. When Jesus comes, Paul assures them, the dead will be raised and the living will be caught up, and all of us will be together where we’ve always been together, in Christ. The Christian community might grieve the loss of those they’ve loved; but, Paul says, they should not grieve “as others do who have no hope.” Because Christ’s love will give life to us all, there is no loss that is permanent, there is no hurt that will not ultimately be healed, there is no grief that cannot be set in the context of a larger hope that in God all shall be well. And so, Paul says, we can “encourage one another with these words.” Even though we may experience many griefs in our lives—lost relationships, lost opportunities, broken health, the suffering of the innocent, dreams that die before their time, lives that are over when we still have so much to share—even though we experience many griefs, we do not grieve as those who have no hope, but even in the midst of grief we keep looking forward, even in the midst of grief we keep looking for the fulfillment of all our hopes in God. And so we are encouraged, so we take heart, to live the gift of life to its fullest, to be awake and aware of the abundance of life in Christ, and to share that abundant life with those who need it most. We will meet Jesus when he comes, Paul says, not simply in the power of our own lives, but because we’ve been hoping in his life all along. So Paul tells us another way to let our light shine for God: we can be hopeful.

Another way to let our light shine for God is in joy. Remember, Jesus’ image for what happens when God comes among us is a wedding banquet, it’s a party—and Jesus’ story says that one of the signs of God’s presence is sheer unfettered enthusiastic *joy*. A long time ago, when I was a fairly new priest, I was sent to call on a woman of the parish who was homebound, and who had been a librarian who loved to read but who now had macular degeneration and could barely read at all, and who had been very active and very involved in church and community but now spent most of her days alone. I expected it was going to be a melancholy sort of visit, and I tried to prepare myself for that. But when I came to her door she greeted me warmly, and she sat me down in her favorite spot near the window, where we could both feel the sun on her faces, and she told me stories—stories of her life, stories of the people she’d known in the library, stories about the church that helped me understand a lot of what was going on there. And she laughed. She laughed with delight at the joy she’d known—and still knew—in her life. And she got me to laugh, too, and told me it made her happy to help someone else be happy that day. As I think about that visit, I realize what a tremendous moment of grace it was, and how the sheer joy of our conversation was a light to reveal the presence there with us the whole time. We Christians light the way for Jesus in our joy: the joy of reaching out to each other, the joy of beauty, the joy of music, the joy of breaking bread and sharing wine, the joy of taking delight in every moment of God’s creation. One way we let our light shine for Christ is in joy.

Be joyful. Be hopeful. Be faithful. That’s what it means for us to let our light shine, that’s what it means for us to have enough oil for our lamps, that’s what it means for us to show forth the way of the Bridegroom when he comes. And the really good news of the Gospel for us today is that Christ comes to us in every moment—not just at the end of the world, not just at the end of our lives, but Christ comes to us in every moment, filling us with light, and helping us let our light shine to reveal Christ’s presence for all the world. May we all be ready to be that light. Amen.