

Matthew 25:1-13 Future to present. 2017

My friend, Mary, who lives in the Twin Cities, is a frequent flier when it comes to Facebook posting, regularly putting up 5-10 posts a day, which she culls from a variety of diverse and interesting sources. A few days ago, she put up this post, tagging me, saying, “If this happens, I’ll be coming up your way.” The “this” that might happen was a post taken from the City Pages in the Twin Cities entitled, “Duluth named 7th best city for surviving the nuclear apocalypse.” In the case of such an event, my friend Mary plans on moving in with me! The post, at least partially, but perhaps not wholly, in jest, continued: “When nuclear war breaks out in the cat fight between Kim Jung-On and Donald Trump, Duluth is where you want to be.” The reasons given for Duluth’s good survivability score were as follows: “Duluth’s score namely comes from its access to Lake Superior, its large percentage of health care workers, and Minnesota’s generally high rank in developing solar power, allowing residents to survive when the power grid collapses.” The article warned Twin Cities residents that their odds of survival in such a scenario were not good, and that if this grim vision becomes a reality, they should definitely head north. Imagine *that* traffic jam along 35 near Hinkley! And if you wonder who sponsored such a research project into this topic, it was the thoughtful folks at Realtor.com. Perhaps they have large inventory in all the cities that made the top 10 survivability list, who knows?

Well, of course, I was relieved to know that all of us are well located in the event of this hopefully merely hypothetical scenario. But, it also made me think of how much in our culture right now involves preparing for grim future scenarios. This is true in entertainment, certainly. One of the most popular tv shows in the world right now is the

Walking Dead. I don't happen to watch it, but I know people who do. The Walking Dead is set in a post-apocalyptic world, where all those folks who apparently didn't get to Duluth in time are now zombies and walking about dead, presumably. Dystopian entertainment like this is very popular. The word dystopian refers to a future vision of bleakness, totalitarianism, meltdown of civilization and savagery amongst the human race. Often a nuclear crisis or raging epidemic or alien invasion has set the stage. The mood is generally unrelentingly sad and hopeless. And from Planet of the Apes to Clockwork Orange to The Matrix to The Hunger Games to Blade Runner to Insurgent and many more stories, films, and TV shows, our culture is nearly obsessed with this kind of future vision, done up for us in dark and spectacular special effects.

But, it's not just in entertainment that we anticipate and prepare for the worst scenario. It's real life, isn't it. There has been much more talk about nuclear war in recent months, in part because of North Korea and Kim Jung-on. And more painfully, the church shooting this last Sunday heightened fears of violence for many; it certainly did for me. When I saw the pictures of that small white country church in a small village, I was horrified by the resemblance to our own setting. Throughout this week I've had discussions with parishioners, including some of you, and other clergy in the area, centering around security in church and in other public places, as well. I learned that some churches in larger Cities have armed guards at the doors. I learned that lock down drills are commonplace in our public schools; my mentee, D'Leah, who attends grade school in West Duluth, assured me that about monthly, they do a lock down drill. As soon as the alarm sounds, the door is locked, they turn their classroom tables onto their sides as shields, and they crouch quietly down along a wall, out of sight from the window

in the door. She told me this completely matter of factly and without emotion. That's her world. And I suppose it's the world we all live in, but I can't claim to like it much. No wonder there's such a drive towards dark dystopian future visions. One of the results of such a future scenario is the kind of fearful preparation it inspires in the present. Do we hire armed guards? Do we stock pile weapons, water, and canned goods? Do we build bunkers in our back yards? Do we practice survival drills? Or do we, alternately, just give up, embrace hopelessness and depression right now, because everything in the future is beyond redeeming anyway?

Now that I've thoroughly depressed you, which isn't that hard to do in troubled times like our own and in the midst of bleak November, let's turn our focus onto our Gospel lesson. Keep in mind as we do so, that while their times may appear through our romanticized historical vantage point to have been simpler and happier than ours, no one had told them that. Their world may have been simpler than ours, but the burdens of physical illness, violent political oppression, and death as a frequent companion were actually far closer at hand for them, then for us. Plenty of 1st century Jews, Christians, and Gentiles alike had a grim vision for the future, some of which made its way into Scripture passages of an apocalyptic nature, dealing with graphic and often violent images of the end times. Apocolytic or dystopian viewpoints are hardly confined to our times, nor are they only found in the Bible in ancient times. They are universal and timeless-- such is the brokenness of our world.

But our Scripture lesson this morning, a parable of Jesus, presents a *different* vision of the future and invites a *different* type of preparation than moving to Duluth or stockpiling goods. It's not an easy parable; we can't help but feel badly for those 5

foolish bridesmaids. But it is a parable that invites us to envision and prepare for a far different future than that which dominates our culture at present. Let's take a look.

Like other parables in Scripture, this one is set within the context of a wedding. Jesus liked weddings, didn't he? He turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana in the Gospel of John. And he tells several parables using a wedding as the back drop, including this one. You and I know that weddings come in all shapes and sizes *these* days, but what would Jesus and his listeners be picturing? Almost certainly they would have in mind a typical 1st C. Jewish wedding in a small community, where everybody is invited and the festivities, which could be fairly boisterous, extended for up to 7 days. That, says Jesus, is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. *That* is the future vision: connectedness, joyfulness, abundance. He draws our attention to one aspect of the wedding, the wedding party, specifically the bridesmaids. Here again, you and I know that bridesmaids come in all shapes and sizes-- that sometimes there is just one, sometimes there seem to be dozens, there can be junior bridesmaids, they may wear splashy gowns or simple dresses or high heels or flip flops. So, what does Jesus have in mind here? Well, this was a large wedding, with 10 bridesmaids, large even by our standards, a logistical nightmare, in fact. As you know, the major responsibility of bridesmaids today is to fit into the dress ordered for them by the bride and to smile during the picture taking even if their feet hurt. Moreover, I just read online, so it must be true, that the average bridesmaid spends well over \$1000 to be a bridesmaid, between the purchase of the dress, possible travel and lodging expense, and so on. It's a bit of a labor of love to be a bridesmaid in our day and age, the truth be told. But, 1st C. bridesmaids, while they may have spent less money and didn't have to pose for pictures, had a more

active role in the festivities. The actual legal aspect of weddings in those days pretty much took place with the betrothal; the signing of the marriage license, or the 1st C. equivalent of that, occurred at *that* point. The actual day of the wedding was more about travel. It involved the groom and the groom's entourage journeying to the bride's home, and then she journeying to their new home together, where a feast occurs. The bridesmaids were a part of this journeying. They were to run out in the evening with lamps lit and escort the bridegroom and bridal party into the marriage feast. It sounds like an attractive and elegant touch, kind of like going to the wedding reception in a horse drawn carriage down a road lined with tiki torches or luminaries. But, in this case, it was likely a practical touch as well, as electric street lights were in short supply in 1st C. Israel.

Here is where the parable becomes a bit of a character study. It seems that five of these bridesmaids were that type of person who is well prepared for the task at hand, even should some unexpected complications arise. They had not only oil in their lamps; they had brought extra oil along, just in case it was needed. The other five bridesmaids were more the laid back type of person who is there and ready to go, but hasn't planned ahead for any unusual contingencies. These 5 took their full lamps with them as they hurried out the door, but they hadn't given time or thought to bring any extra oil in case of a problem. And there *was* a problem! The bridal party is delayed. So much so, that *all* 10 of the bridesmaids fell asleep while waiting. Which we may want to take note of. Sometimes we wait a long time for something, longer than we think we ought to. Whether a happy event like a birth or a wedding, or a sad event like an inevitable death, the wait sometimes gets long, and we grow weary, and we need to rest. *Both* the wise

and foolish maidens do so. This parable isn't scolding us for finding waiting to be tiring and needing to rest. It isn't demanding constant wakefulness, vigilance, and remaining on alert status. That's just wouldn't be a realistic request to make of us. But, there is a problem as a result of the long wait. And there is a type of preparation that makes a difference. The oil in the lamps was all used up by the time the bridegroom is sighted. What now? Those five wise bridesmaids are all set. They use their extra oil to re-fill their lamps, but they don't have enough extra to fill the other five's lamps as well. The other five must run off, looking for a Holiday Station or Kwik Trip that is open at midnight and sells lamp oil. They find one, but by the time they return, it's too late. The doors are closed. They've missed the wedding party. And the reason is that they were foolishly unprepared. We wish that the bridegroom would nevertheless let them in, but that doesn't happen. They are, quite simply, too late. The single point of this parable, which is a story form that is aiming towards making one single point, would seem to be: be prepared. Even in the case of a delay.

But, do you see the stark contrast between the future vision and type of preparation called for in this Scripture passage, versus the future vision and type of preparation we are struggling with in our times? This is no dark, hopeless, dystopian vision, but a joyful wedding celebration. And preparation isn't so much about armed guards or how to duck and cover or stocking up weapons and canned goods; it's just about having enough oil for your lamp. My point is that our vision of the future, whether Scriptural or cultural---and there is a vast gulf between the two---that vision of the future will impact our present, in terms of how we prepare. If we, as Christians, are preparing for the wedding banquet of God, as opposed to a dystopian meltdown, we need oil in our

lamps. So, what does that suggest for our present preparation and lives? If we see a future with hope, because God is a part of the future, just as God as a part of the present, then how does that affect our plans and activities *today*?

Wouldn't it mean that we live now faithfully and hopefully? Like people who believe that God has our times in God's hands? That we don't post an armed guard at the church door, but continue to practice welcome and hospitality? That we believe in the future, so we added on to the building, put in an elevator, create a columbarium, remodel the kitchen, because as the heart of the community, as God's heart for this community, we matter. We need to be active, enthusiastic, hopeful planners and doers, because God has a future ahead for us and our community. We are people who celebrate Thanksgiving with gratitude, and participate in Julebyen festivities with cheerful hearts and continue to be a part of all the ways God's Spirit is already active and up to a whole lot of good in this community. We don't live here to avoid nuclear conflagration; we live here because we so easily see the goodness of God along the North Shore of Lake Superior, and because we are a part of a community that resembles the wedding banquet of Matthew far more than the zombies of the Walking Dead! And I, for one, thank God for that, don't you ?

Shortly, we celebrate Holy Communion. A sacrament that is described in our liturgy as "the foretaste of the feast to come"...referencing parables just like today's, a wedding feast. We share in this banquet with hope in our hearts and trust in the future, that it is in God's hands. The community of faith that gathers around this altar then leaves to act with hope in our world, because *that* is the oil in our lamps, the kind of preparation that makes our waiting hopeful rather than fearful. What is the oil in our

lamps? The faith and hope that God gives us, and the good work we do in our community and world as a result. All this provides an abundance of oil for our lamps, even in times of waiting. Our future and all of our waitings are in God's hands; and those are good, strong hands in which to be. Amen.