

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 23th Sunday after Pentecost

November 8, 2020

AMOS 5:18-24 | PSALM 70

I THESSALONIANS 4:13-18 | MATTHEW 25:1-13

Every day at morning and evening prayer, the Church throughout the world confesses its shortest summary of the faith in the Apostle's Creed. The Apostle's Creed became the basis of our baptismal confession because it is short and sweet – and paints a picture. It gives us a geometry, a visual image, of how our Lord Jesus' journey will intersect with ours, with every story ever told.

Here is the picture: our savior, Jesus, the Christ, arrived on our level, was brought low, descended to the depths, rose to the heights, and will return. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, he descended to the dead, and on the third day rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. In his dying and rising Jesus has reached out to every soul. In his coming again, we will have the most significant encounter, and we will find out if we recognize him, and he recognizes us.

Most of us do not spend too much time really reflecting on this final judgment. The prophet Amos tells us not to hope for it, because of our wickedness, we will not find good news there; we will not like the verdict. There are a great many jokes of meeting St. Peter at the pearly gates, a genre that signifies that we are well aware that we small insignificant human beings with our sad stories and often petty sins don't even give God enough to work with. The great poet T.S. Eliot famously said: "Humankind cannot bear very much reality."

We can all relate to the experience of life really as a game of musical chairs. This image sticks with me. The music does stop. The chair is taken out from under us. The game is up. What will be will be. The judgment day has come. Seventy million people cast their votes. Seventy six million people cast theirs. What does it mean? Each side thinks it is impossible that the other side could lose. What will it mean?

Today, we hear Jesus try to awaken our imaginations, try to warn us of how difficult that day will be. Knowing that his earthly judgment awaits him in just hours, he has a story for us, a strange tale of ten bridesmaids who have a job to do. Half will be up to the task, half will not. All the people in the story seem to be under a great deal of pressure. There is no room for error. No forgiveness for a miscalculation.

Jesus chooses a scene that is translatable to every culture and every time. A wedding is serious business, humanity's biggest business and cultural event. As every wedding planner knows, there can be no mistakes! You are either in the right place at the right time, fulfilling your role, or you will miss the party.

Go ahead. Zoom in to the details of this parable. Remember that weddings in Jesus' day were week long affairs, involving the preparation at the bride's village and home, the procession of the bridegroom, the acceptance and exchange of the gifts and terms of the families, and finally the entrance to the party, where two people, two families, two tribes, become each in their own way, one. Committed to each other, recognized, known to each other, partners in the business of life.

Now zoom out. We could just take the strangeness of the parable as a clue, especially the cold calculating attitude of the groom who doesn't seem to be bothered by the fact that he is late! We are meant to focus only for a moment on the oil, the lamps, the upset, the anxiety, the sense of fear and scarcity, the lack of generosity, and realize that all that matters is that we be present when the groom appears.

Whether we have been foolish or wise, whether we are always prepared for the exact job required of us, we just cannot afford to miss his coming to us, his coming for us.

Over the years I have come to look forward to this final judgment. Mostly, I am tired of judging myself, and having to live with the partial judgment of others. I will be relieved, I hope, to finally know the truth about myself, and the truth about so many things that have happened in my life.

I am tired of fake news, fake narratives about the purpose of everything. This parable is so ugly, so rough around the edges, it helps me imagine that everything depends upon another way to be wise.

The question is simply: Will I recognize Jesus when he comes, and will he recognize me as one of his? To be wise is to be ready, not with lamps, or oil, or any other gifts or agendas, but with ourselves. To be wise is to look up now to meet him.

To be wise is to take his teaching to heart, to look for him everyday amongst those who are poor in spirit, who are mourning, who are meek, so vulnerable they cannot defend themselves, among those who hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness. To look for him among those who are peacemakers.

The coming one says: now is the time for balancing accounts; now is the time for a little honesty. So men and women of honor who await the arrival of the bridegroom: let us embrace the job we have to do in the meantime. What do we need to complete our tasks as we wait for his coming.

As for me, I have turned off Twitter and Facebook and find myself focussing on this. Jesus began his journey by speaking, among other things, these words: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

I am going to pray today for the grace to start in my heart, clear it of the junk, the noise, the toxins. Check the lamps. Check the oil supply. See what time it is. Try to be a little wiser. Only the pure in heart have even a chance of seeing the Lord when he comes! (Amen.)