

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
MATTHEW 25:1-13

“Choose this day whom you will serve.” Joshua 24:15 (NRSV)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we come closer and closer to the end of the liturgical year, the themes of judgment and the end become more and more prominent in the lessons we hear read. Our lessons today from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel both have a sense of decision and urgency about them.

In the lesson from Joshua, Joshua specifically asks the Hebrew people what God or gods they will serve. They have finally come into the Promised Land and started to settle in it. What God or gods will they serve? Will they serve the gods of Egypt where they were enslaved? Will they serve the gods worshipped by the various peoples they have encountered in their new land? Or will they serve the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt, guided them through the years of wandering in the wilderness and brought them into this new land? They have to make a decision, and their decision will make all of the difference in the world to their lives and to their history.

Our Gospel lesson today tells the story of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to enter his wedding feast and to bring them into it with him. Five are wise. They come prepared for the unexpected wait, and they are ready to enter the feast with the bridegroom when he comes. Five are foolish and do not come prepared for the unexpected wait. They are shut out of the feast. The lesson ends with the admonition “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day or the hour.” Its urgency is palpable.

Most of us gathered here this morning feel the urgency of both lessons. In fact, if anything, they may add to an already deep sense of anxiety and urgency about our loved ones, our world and ourselves. As I have talked with many of you, I have not gotten the sense that the greatest problem in your lives is getting drowsy and drifting off to sleep while you wait for something to happen as the ten virgins did. (Note that despite the warning at the end of the passage, the error of the foolish virgins was not that they fell asleep, all ten fell asleep, but that they came unprepared.) My sense is that even by 5th or 6th grade, many of us are running around so much and have so much to do and so many responsibilities that we are more apt to be drowsy from sleep deprivation. We are like whirling dervishes in perpetual motion.

Over the years, we have all heard a lot of sermons about sins of commission—those things that are sinful if we do them. We do not often hear as much about sins of omission even though they can be just as deadly. I suspect that most of us are much more apt to commit sins of omission rather than serious sins of commission. In our hurried, frenzied lives, we are much more likely not to take the time to really prepare than we are to do something glaringly wrong. Our intentions are good and praiseworthy, but

somehow we never have time to really live life fully or to prepare for that time or times that finally define our lives—those times that change everything—a marriage, the birth of a child, getting a new job, losing a job, illness, or even death.

The wise virgins were commended and rewarded because they came prepared and were ready to enter into the great banquet, the Kingdom of God, when Christ came. The foolish virgins were condemned and barred from entering the great banquet because they did not come prepared and were not ready when the bridegroom came.

Scholars are almost unanimous in saying that the passage from Joshua, in the form that we now have it, is a liturgy—a covenant renewal liturgy. So the scene that is portrayed in today’s first lesson, though very ancient, is very similar to one that was enacted here at St. Barnabas last Sunday. When we go through them in our liturgies, we do not think of The Baptismal Covenant or The Renewal of Baptismal Vows in *The Book of Common Prayer* as being of the same stature and urgency as the scene in today’s lesson from Joshua, but they are.

So the scene in the first lesson for today is not nearly as strange or foreign as it might first seem to be. Most of us in this gathered community today renewed their covenant with God last Sunday just as the Hebrew people renewed their covenant with God nearly three thousand years ago. And our renewal has the same urgency about it as theirs did. “Choose this day whom you will serve

In different ways these two passages of scripture are saying that by the way we live our lives we reveal the God or gods that we serve, and we prepare ourselves for that time/event/crisis that awaits all of us whether it is one of great rejoicing or of testing.

But the truth of the matter is that we can never be fully prepared. We can never know what life has in store for us, and we certainly cannot anticipate and prepare for everything. To try to that would probably only add to our busyness and create so much anxiety that we would be too paralyzed to doing anything.

We have all heard of death bed conversions where the dying person’s persona is finally let go, and they realize that many, if not most, of the things that they have pursued in life were really of little consequence. They have the sudden realization that they have forgotten about love, justice, and God. They have not lived by those things we affirm in our Baptismal Covenant: “to continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers”; to “persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord”; to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ”; to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself”; and to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being”.

If at death, or at other times of visitation, we realize that these are the things of life, then how much fuller and richer would our lives be if they are the substance and character of every day we live? They will probably not fully prepare us for everything that we will face. They will not take away the shock or pain or joy, but if they are the substance of our daily lives, we have far greater resources when we need them. If prayer and walking with God are at the heart of lives, then when we need to turn to God, we will know where to turn. We will know God, and God will know us. If in our lives, we have

taken the time and care to nourish our souls, then our lamps will not be empty when the bridegroom comes.

A chaplain who worked in a long term care facility wrote: “In my work in a long-term care facility, the saddest people I see are those who can find no meaning in their lives because they did not really live. They minded their own business, didn’t get involved, were buffeted by life in spite of it all, and spent a good deal of time asking, “Why me?” The kingdom was breaking in all around them, and they were always on the wrong side of the door from the party.

... After all these years we have lost much of the urgency that accompanied the original telling of the parable. But each of us has our own personal urgency. We are invited to the feast that is taking place all around us right now. Our torches will last only so long, no matter how well oiled we keep them, and then it will be too late. The party is terrible and wonderful, but we don’t want to miss it, for there we will find the Lord.

Amen.

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