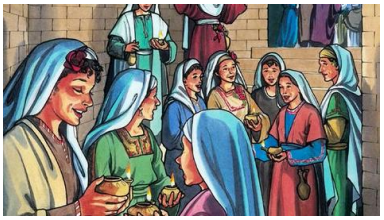
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Gospel lesson

This reading comes after Jesus finished debating at the temple and headed to where He and the disciples were staying during Holy Week.



picture from https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/gnpi-081-wise-foolish-virgins/; courtesy of Good News Productions International and College Press Publishing

Matthew 25:1-13 NRSVue

1 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.

2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them,

4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

6 But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’

7 Then all those young women got up and trimmed their lamps.

8 The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’

9 But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be

enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’

10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet, and the door was shut.

11 Later the other young women came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’

12 But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’

13 Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The Word of God for the people of God

<Children’s/Interactive time>

This Wednesday is Veterans Day. Who here is a US military veteran? <Let them respond>

Thank you so much for your service! Now I have follow up questions: Have you ever been assigned watch duty? What is watch duty like? <Let them respond>

What can happen if you fall asleep on watch? <Let them respond>

So it is important to keep awake, to stay alert when on watch duty. We are grateful for the work you did; last week we remembered saints who did the work of God, those who were ready when the Lord put the opportunity to serve before them. What do you think

God calls us, the members of this congregation, to be ready for now? <Let them respond>

Should we be waiting for the archangel's call and the sound of God's trumpet before we take action? What are we called to do? <Let them respond>

Jesus did not give only a part of Himself for you. You are not forgiven only some of your sins; the Holy Spirit is not present only sometimes.

God does not want just a piece of you. God wants you, every part of you, to be dedicated to the Lord.

Will you humbly serve God in all things, put away all distractions, and not sin again? <Let them respond>

You are witnesses of your choices. I choose God, and I pray that someday we can all reach that Christian perfection that John Wesley envisioned, where we are completely aligned with the will of God in all things and living the kingdom of God on earth always.

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<Hymn "Awake, O Sleeper" UMH #551>

Message: Keep Awake



picture from https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/it-will-be-like-this/week-1-twenty-fourth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a/bulletin-it-will-be-like-this-week-1-graphics

Please pray with me?

Holy Lord who warns us to stay awake,

as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please
- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may be alert to the opportunities You present for us to serve You and humbly fulfill what we have committed to You. Amen.

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We start a new series today, "It Will Be Like This," with Jesus's admonition to "Keep Awake."

> "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, the day is drawing nigh. This week's parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids isn't about judgment, but about staying present with one another and keeping awake to what God is doing among us here and now."

For one of my MDiv classes, I had to review Christian worship services that are different than traditional Methodist worship. In more than one case, there was a time during the liturgy when people were called to come up to the altar and dedicate themselves to the Lord, usually while a hymn played and with one or more spiritual leaders praying with the individuals who came forward.

It is kind of cool to see a stream people committing their lives to Christ in that way. I learned that while some of those were giving themselves to the Holy Spirit for the first time, many of those people had already been baptized and were entering into a

deeper commitment to the Lord, or searching for more guidance with something weighing upon their hearts.

In our Old Testament reading today, we heard about the ancient Israelites recommitting themselves to the Lord. After entering the covenant at Mt. Sinai and wandering in the wilderness for forty years with Moses leading them, they finally entered the land under Joshua's leadership, celebrated the Passover, watched the walls of Jericho collapse miraculously, took ownership of the Promised Land, and divvied it up amongst the tribes.

I find it interesting how the new generation paralleled the old: Under both Moses and Joshua, the people had to cross a large body of water, ran into issues that they asked their leader to sort out, and – when they came to the point where they felt safe – were given the choice to be in covenant with God, which they accepted.

Both the Israelites who left Egypt and those who entered the Promised Land got to see mighty acts of God to help convince them to join in the offered covenant. Later generations did not get to see those; instead, as the psalmist mentions, God commanded the people to teach their children about the Lord so that they could understand the importance of being in covenantal relationship with God.

I think with every generation we are given the choice to be in covenant with God – there are defining generational moments that cause us to think about our faith and how we want to live our lives.

- the “Greatest Generation” had the Great Depression and World War II
- Baby Boomers had publicized assassinations of JFK, MLK, & RFK; the Vietnam War; and the moon landing
- Gen X had Watergate, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the space shuttle Challenger explosion, latchkeys, and the rise of home computers
- Millenials had 9/11, wars in the mid-East, financial crises, and development of social media
- Gen Z had covid-19, smartphones, and teen activists such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg
- Gen Alpha has AI and the current political divide in the US

Amidst all of that, the people of God continued to tell of the wondrous things our Lord has done for us, with varying degrees of response from the succeeding generations. The goal is that we develop a strong relationship with our Creator, so that when our time here is done, we can live eternally in the kingdom of heaven. And as we all know, relationships take work.

The women awaiting the bridegroom had prepared for his arrival; they were all dressed to greet him and each had a lit lamp. The wise ones went beyond that to bring extra oil, but the foolish ones did not.

The thing of it is, I think the foolish ones would have been OK, albeit embarrassed, had they stayed with unlit lamps. But they were so focused on the social expectations, the ritual, that they chose to go after oil rather than stay present for the arriving bridegroom.

And they were not the only ones who lost out. The "wise" women lost friends and helpers for the work they would have to do after the party; they were focused on themselves, refusing to risk sharing their oil, and giving bad advice to the foolish women, that they should leave. It also meant the one they were there to honor, the bridegroom, received less than he should have.

God does not force us, but gives us choices and works with what we are willing to share/do. If we do not pay attention to what God calls us to, we wind up unprepared for the blessings our Lord provides to us.

If we are more focused on judging someone than on seeing the embodiment of Christ in them, how are we to develop a relationship of mutual love with them? We need to remain vigilant about staying focused on the love of God in all aspects of our lives.

Keep in mind also, not only do we not want to have the door shut on us, we should strive to make sure [as many others as we can] come through the open door with us, for the glory of God.

The Thessalonians were concerned about who in their community might have missed the opportunity to get into heaven. The early church was awaiting the literal return of Christ, expecting Him within their lifetimes to descend triumphantly from heaven to take over the world. However, some believers died before Jesus showed up the way they expected.

The church members were worried that their dead were lost, not able to enter the kingdom – and if so, was their suffering for Christ in vain? Paul made it clear: those who died in faith before the parousia, the glorious return of Christ at the end of the world, would arise to join the kingdom before the living would.

When I think of God, eternal beyond the created dimension of time, it seems to me that when we die we transition from time to timelessness – and thus see all the saints joining the kingdom in that same instance of transition into eternity. I do not know what the end of this world will look like or when it will come, and I do not want to rush it because of the beauty I see in creation. I expect to be long dead to this world before it ends.

I also do not know when I will die. Very few people know even a window of time for that, and none can guarantee the precise moment before it arrives. So, it behooves us to think of every day as possibly our last. What do we have yet to resolve before we go?

If I died tonight, would those I care about have assurance of my love? Do I have assurance that they know God's love, that we can be reunited in that love when their time comes? And like flasks of extra oil:

- Who have I missed caring for, that could really use the love of Jesus in their lives?
- Who needs to be taught about Christ, that the Holy Spirit can shine brighter for longer in this world?
- How many opportunities for grace have I let slip by because I was distracted by material world things?

God will not force you to do what is right in this life. God gives us a choice of who or what we will follow and serve, and calls us to respond to that choice – and not choosing is a choice for sin, because relationships take active work.

God calls us to live more fully than that. We need to shake off the sleepiness of sinful distractions and stay alert for God's grace in our lives, to live the love of Jesus so that the world shines with God's grace, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So let us:

- Build our relationship with God more each day.
- Keep our eyes open and attentive to other's needs, emotional and spiritual as well as physical, and show God's grace for them.
- Be present – remember that being part of a mutually nurturing relationship matters far more than being procedurally right. Let us set aside our own egos to dwell with the person beside us/before us/in our midst, that the glory of God may be greater for their sharing the love of Christ along with us.

And now let us remind ourselves for what we should keep awake by reciting together: