Sermon: Pentecost 24A November 8, 2026

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Texts: Amos 5:18-24, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, Matt. 25:1-13

What's a preacher…and a congregation!...to do with the set of scripture readings we've been dealt today?! Lessons that seem almost contradictory – consoling yet cautionary, full of hope and full of doom, revealing a God who is firm yet firmly unpredictable. Well, maybe we should **begin** by just admitting these readings are confusing and worrying. Then we can take a big breath and, with the Spirit's help, try to find connections among them and, **more importantly**, find the **gospel** in them…which is **always** the goal.

Let's begin with the parable from Matthew – one of three Jesus told his disciples who were growing concerned about how everything was going to work out in the end…and **when exactly** the end would come. Today's parable involves bridesmaids wise and foolish and a bridegroom who's delayed…but curiously, **no bride**! We've got lamps and the oil needed to make them burn and give light, we've got waiting and drowsiness, and we've got a door that opens and shuts, letting some in, keeping others out.

I remember this story well from my childhood, and I remember the message I was taught it told: be prepared, stay awake, or you'll miss out on the big event…which seems just one step up from the Boy Scout motto: "Be prepared." But **now** I don't think that **is** the message. Because if it is, this parable flies in the face of the Gospel. Let me show you what I mean.

Though the parable describes some of the women as "wise," they're certainly not sharers. Their refusal to share the extra oil they have seems at odds with the Jesus who said, "If someone asks you for their coat, give them your shirt, too." And if the message is "Stay awake," well, the "wise" ones fell asleep, **too**. They didn't have any more endurance than their "foolish" sisters. And if the message is, "Be resourceful," well, I'd put my money on the **foolish** bridesmaids. Because somehow they were able to

find oil without any help from their peers and long after the shops had closed. (I mean, it was **midnight** after all!) And although we like to play the matching game with parables, the allegorical approach, I think it's **more** likely that this is a **contrast** parable, a story that points out the difference between **our** ways and God's. And if **that's** the case, then we've been too quick to identify the bridegroom with Jesus, who, unlike the character in this story, **never** shuts people out, even fools and sinners…including **all of us**.

And if **that's** the case, then maybe the women who are standing this side of the closed door **aren't** missing out on the big event **after all**. Maybe Jesus is actually on the same side of the door that **they** are, with those left behind, with those who were excluded. It makes sense if you consider that, according to Matthew, Jesus told this parable in the time between his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his crucifixion…

which means **Jesus** was waiting, too…waiting for what would come next, for what seemed to the world to be the **end** of possibilities, the end of hope and life, but which, by God's wild and wonderful grace, was to be the death of death itself…and the opening of the door for us into eternal life and the feast that has no end. When Jesus was arrested, convicted, put to death, and buried, it **seemed** as if the door was closing on life and a future for him…**and for us**. But, as my grandmother used to say, close a door and God opens a window. So in the depths of the tomb, when there wasn't enough breath, let alone, oil to light the way to life, God came and opened the tomb itself. And Jesus stepped out, alive and invincible. But he didn't leave us behind. He didn't let the door swing shut on us. **No**, Jesus stepped out and came back **to** us and **for** us and promised that life forever with God was ours – nothing to buy, nothing to earn, nothing to borrow. Jesus declared: The promise is real. The promise is true. And I will come **again** to bring **all** the living and the dead together in the heart of God…where the **only** thing the door will shut on is **death**.

That's what Paul was telling the Thessalonians, too, who were growing uneasy, who were finding it hard to wait…and wondering if those who'd **already** died really **were** with the Lord…and if they themselves, who

were **still** alive, could trust and believe that **they** would be with the Lord, **too**. And this is also **our** dilemma. We **too** get impatient and worried. And, if the Thessalonians -- who lived not very long after Jesus died and rose again were anxious and finding it difficult to wait…or to wait **confidently**, no wonder **we**, at this point in history, find ourselves having those same doubts and fears, too.

For we see so many sad and terrible things going on around us…as they **have** been since sin first entered the world. And so we wonder if we are waiting in vain…or if we've missed it…or if we're going to find the door shut in our face and be left without hope or joy. Paul understands this, so the **last** words he says about this…at least in **today's** text, are **these**: "Therefore, encourage one another with these words."

Paul wants us to understand that our waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises is waiting **with the Lord** and **waiting with each other in the Lord**. And our waiting is a time of hopeful activity, not passive, hopeless inertia. Our waiting is the time God has given us to encourage one another, to be in solidarity with each other, and to share with each other the hope that is in us, the hope that is for **all of us. All** of us find it difficult to stay awake in hope and expectation. That is why God calls us to **take turns** encouraging, praying for, supporting, and reinvigorating each other. It reminds me of a story of one of my favorite saints, Ethel Kalin, who was a member of Resurrection, the last parish I served in Oakland… **and** the mother of Ev Kalin, pastor and New Testament scholar at Seminex and PLTS. One night as women of the parish met for Bible study, Ethel suddenly said, "You know, right now I cannot pray. I try and try and I just cannot." Everyone was quiet for a time, because this was Ethel, who'd been a woman of faith for nearly 100 years…and inspiration to us all. Then one of the women said, "Don't worry, Ethel. We'll pray **for you** until **you** can pray again." And they did. **That's** the kind of encouragement Paul was talking about and the kind of encouragement Jesus **himself** offered to people around him who felt discouraged, defeated, hopeless, and afraid.

And that, in a round-about way, gets us to Amos, whose words from God this morning can sound pretty scary and judgmental. Imagine hearing

God say, “When I see you at worship and hear you sing your pretty hymns, I hold my nose and I plug my ears, because you’ve forgotten that worship is not just about “doing church”; worship **also** involves doing justice and caring for your brothers and sisters, especially those who seem without resources, spiritual or material.”

So in these last days and weeks of this church year, before we begin a new year all over again, before we move from celebrating the Reign of Christ and return to Mary’s womb and the promise of a Savior, God calls us to consider **how** we will wait for the Lord…and invites us to wait not alone, but **with** each other, with words and deeds of encouragement, with words and deeds that fill each other with what we need – the balm of consolation and the oil of promise.

And, in that wild and wonderful way that God has of mixing up time, mixing up past, present, and future, God calls us to see that we wait **with Jesus**, who is standing beside us **even now** as the pledge and the promise of the day when we and all God’s people will stand with him in the house of the love, in the courts of the Lord, whenever and however that will be.

So, sisters and brothers, as the angels of the Bible keep reminding us, don’t be afraid – or worried or discouraged. Don’t shut the door on hope, whatever the turmoil of this world, whatever hopes and dreams have **yet** to be fulfilled. Instead, let us remain vigilant and steadfast in **telling** one another and **showing** one another through love and prayers, acts of justice and compassion that Christ is here, Christ is with us…and Christ **will** come again…and **then** we will be him **fully forever.** This is the Good News. Thanks be to God! Amen.