

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church
on November 12, 2023.**

THIS DAY

<Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; Matthew 25:1-13>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

What are we willing to wait for? To what are we willing to commit our time and our energy to being vigilant and watchful, even as we do not see imminent sign of realization? And how long do we remain steadfast in our waiting? I feel that I could be on solid ground in making the argument that people from Buffalo and Western New York are exceptional in their capacity and capability to wait, but even we have our limits.

A story is told of a Phillips Brooks, an Episcopalian priest who served Boston's Trinity Church, who wrote the lyrics to "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and who was generally known as a quiet and patient man, full of poise and intentionality. One day, however, it is said that a parishioner stopped by the church on a whim and found Rev. Brooks pacing the floor like a caged animal, clearly frustrated and on edge. "Whatever could be the matter?" the surprised parishioner asked. "What's the trouble?"

To which, the usually quiet and poise Phillips Brooks replied, "The trouble is that I am in a hurry, but God isn't!"

I'm tempted to ask you to raise your hand if that statement, and its attendant frustration, has ever felt true to you, but I think we would all know the response to that already. Even as we approach the liturgical season of Advent waiting, wherein we place ourselves squarely in the tension of the now and the not-yet, in-between realization and anticipation, we are placed today in a spirit of urgency and, to a degree, anxiety.

The parables of Jesus in our reading this morning place firmly before the minds and eyes of the disciples, including us, the exhortation to be ready, to be prepared, and to be vigilant in our watchfulness. In the context of our reading, Jesus is speaking to the disciples ahead of his arrest and passion, and is seeking to give them every last bit of teaching and encouragement before he will be taken from them, and they face their own trials. Even with the exhortation to be ready and prepared, to be watchful and alert, the underlying sense of urgency is nearly palpable. It seems to combine qualities I learned from both Boy Scouts and the fire department: "Be Prepared" coupled with "Hurry up and Wait."

And to make his point, Jesus offers a parable of ten bridesmaids who are sent to wait and watch for the arrival of the groom, that he may be appropriately escorted to the wedding festivities. Many scholars and theologians over the centuries have built on the

interpretation implied by Jesus as to who is the groom, who are the bridesmaids, and what the wedding represents. We, too, could have good conversation about those dynamics. But I'd like to focus our attention instead on what separates the two subgroups of these bridesmaids, and the choice that led to their ultimate distinction.

Now all ten of them know their job: they are to go out and await the bridegroom, in order to escort him safely and accordingly. They do not know the hour of his arrival or how long they will be waiting, only that they must be watchful. They come prepared with their lamps, as much to ward off the darkness and light their way as to mark their procession for all to see. But ultimately, five of the group - fully half - will find themselves outside of the festal celebrations by the end of the parable. Why? They all began the same way. Some scholars have argued that the falling asleep was the downfall, but all ten of them fell asleep, and all were negligent in their watchfulness.

Ultimately, I would dare say, the point of separation came not even from one half the group having enough oil while the other half did not, but from the dedication and determination that the first five demonstrated. All ten of these bridesmaids had made the choice to serve in such a capacity, but only five had done so with the determination to be ready and prepared when the time came, which included trimming their lamps ahead of time and having enough oil on hand and in their lamps.

By the way: Ask one of the canoe trip participants about having enough camp stove fuel, or rather, the honest mistake of overlooking the fuel when repacking one morning. Our excitement for what we are about - to say nothing of what in the world itself which distracts us - our excitement can easily distract our dedication and determination to fully live out our responsibilities. I do not say this to blame; I'm still not entirely sure I believe the other five bridesmaids should be faulted. But there is a point wherein our dedication to our task either meets the needs, or it doesn't. And the separation between those two realities is razor thin.

Which is why the reading from Joshua carries so much more import and is so momentous. This is one of my favorite scenes in the development of faithful living for the people of God. It can be hard to imagine, but Shechem - where Joshua has gathered the tribes - is a village in a valley. It is the place where God appeared to Jacob, and Jacob in turn buried all the idols of foreign and lesser gods beneath a tree in order to dedicate himself to serving Yahweh God. It's where Jacob's Well is located. It represents both the presence of God to the nascent peoples *and* their ancestors' commitment to follow. Being a spot in a valley, there are two hills that rise on either side, forming a large, but natural, amphitheater. And it was on the sides of these hills that the tribes, as the redeveloping people of God, gathered. Joshua, and his family, stood in the middle, on the ground where - generations before - their common ancestor encountered God and dedicated himself to serve and follow God.

Standing there, in the valley between these two hills, with a tree not far off, located all of them in the same place wherein previous dedications to God had taken place. Joshua locates them in their growing faith there, as well. Remember, even though they have

entered the Promised Land at the end of a journey that spanned generations, they are still relearning - and recommitting - to their identity as God's people. To being led by God. To living in faithful commitment and obedience. And so Joshua has the histories read, for all the people, proclaiming again who the people have been and who God is. Joshua has the commandments read, to remind them again what it will mean to live as God's people and among themselves.

And then, then Joshua places the critical choice before them. "Choose this day, who you will serve, whether it will be the foreign gods we have carried with us, or the God of Hosts who has led us to this place. Choose this day whom you will serve; but as for me and my house, we have chosen the Lord."

The people choose God. Even when Joshua attempts to dissuade them, to test their commitment, foreshadowing that the people will fail and that to follow God may not always be realized in the ways they imagine, the people choose God. And in so choosing, in so dedicating, they commit to be watchful, prepared, and ready.

Who do we choose, this day? To whom do we commit our time, our energy, our passion and intelligence? To whom do we commit our preparedness and dedication. Is it the things in this world which distract us and entertain us without substance? Or is it the One who can bring us to Life Abundant, Life Everlasting, Life fulfilled?

We may yet falter and stumble along the way. We may doze off and fall asleep. We may fumble, but as one of you has commented to me along the way of these past months, "it's inevitable to fumble; so long as we're trying to fumbling forward in faith, we can trust God to bring us along." But faltering or stumbling, or fumbling won't be the defining or determining factors. The determination lies in our commitment, our choosing, our dedicating, day after day after day. Just as we have recently dedicated our pledges, so too do we dedicate our hearts, our minds, our lives. Whom do we choose, and for whom do we wait?

As for me and my house, we have chosen the Lord. May we all do so together. Amen.