<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.

This parable is not necessarily about what we may think this parable is about.

We would think, initially, that this parable is a warning to be prepared. And if that were the case, I would tell you the story about Carl McCunn. Carl McCunn moved from Texas to Alaska in the 1970’s, going from the second-largest state in the United States to the largest, though that wasn’t why he moved. Rather, he sought a more rugged frontier to work and belong in, and work at the time outside of Fairbanks was on the Alaska Pipeline. But in 1981 Carl determined that he wanted to spend the summer living off the land, as best as he could, and experience a more rugged and isolated frontier. He hired a bush pilot to drop him at an unnamed lake for the summer, with only the provisions that he could bring in with him.

He lived this way for most of the summer, but despite the plans he had made he still thought he brought too much, and so tossed some of his “excessive” gear and ammunition away through those months. When fall arrived, however, he realized he had overlooked one crucial part of the plan: arranging to be picked up again. By the time this realization sunk in, he was too weak, and had no more supplies, and so was unable to make his way back to civilization. His story took a predictable and tragic turn.

And so if our parable this morning about the bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom was merely about being prepared, this story of Carl McCann would be enough of a warning. But this parable is about more than preparation, it is about wisdom and what that means for us in our lives of faith today.

Similarly, this historical moment in the life of the people of Israel, as Joshua gathers them on the hills around Shechem, is not necessarily what we think this historical moment is about. We may think it is about renewing the covenant the people have with God, and recommitting to it, and we would not be wrong, but we also would not be fully correct. If it were merely a moment which reflected a passive choice regarding national identity, I might try to make a clumsy allusion to voting and elections, an allusion which would likely fall on its face.

But this moment is about so much more than a passive choice on a national level. No, this moment, this gathering of the people, is a moment of faithfulness. And when paired with the parable from Matthew’s gospel - the only gospel which contains this exact parable - when paired together it all becomes an invitation to choose faithful wisdom.

Shechem is in the region which would become Samaria after the Kingdoms split into Israel and Judah, North and South. That comes later in the history of the people of God. But now, Shechem is the town that has grown around the location of Jacob’s Well, nearby the spot Jacob had his vision of angels of the Lord ascending and descending

between heaven and earth, and also not so distant from the place where Jacob wrestled the angel and received both a broken hip and a new name, the new covenantal identity of Israel. Shechem has become an area which represents the nearness of God and the liminality between heaven and earth, spiritual and mundane.

The growing town is nestled in the valley between two small hills, creating a natural gathering spot, and so Joshua calls all the people of all the tribes - not just the leaders - and spreads them out across the face of these two hills, in the region where their ancestor Jacob encountered God. Then he stands in the valley, in the center and issues to them an ultimatum: “choose this day whom you will serve.”

Joshua doesn’t seem to care whether the people choose YHWH God or any of the other man-made gods they have picked up along the way, but he is tired of the people trying to serve both. More than that, Joshua knows that God is tired of the divided loyalties of the people. And regardless of how he comes across, Joshua knows that there really is only one choice for the people, but also that it is one which they need to commit to anew as they truly settle in the land toward which they and their ancestors have journeyed.

“Choose this day whom you will serve,” Joshua puts to the people. “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

This declaration offers us much that we need to know about this choice. First, it is not a national choosing; if it were, he would have gathered the leaders of the Tribes of Israel and had them choose as representatives of everyone else. Rather, Joshua calls all the people, and it is upon each household, each family, to choose. And this is still true for us, today, as we gather each week in worship. This is not a choice we make on behalf of others, rather it is a choice we make for ourselves, or at the most, perhaps for our households.

We choose, this day and every day, to commit to serving and following the Lord. We choose, in every conversation and every meeting and every encounter and even with every thought, whether it will be such as honors and connects us to God or not. We are still choosing, in our lives, which god we will follow.

And along with that, the choice is one of an active nature. For the people gathered on the hills around Shechem, it is not a choice of claiming a name but of living into an identity, a commitment to dedicate every act of their lives - and it is active - to living out this choice. Being involved. Being engaged. Even, and especially, when there are easier, softer, and more expedient options that are available. For them, on this occasion and in this moment, it is an invitation to active, faithful living.

“Choose this day, whom you will serve…”.

Just because this is active, however, does not mean it is simply blind. Not that any of us thought that, anyway, but this degree of faith is called upon to be wise, as well. It is this wisdom that allows and enables five of the bridesmaids to be prepared and attend to

their lamps before everyone fell asleep, for all ten of them did, indeed, fall asleep. But when the bridegroom arrived, only five were able to go forth into the celebration, for they had seen to their lamps in advance to ensure that the oil would not run out before anything even began.

We can see the warning to be prepared, as we discussed earlier, but the deeper message is to *be participatory*. Faithful wisdom is not simply known by the head, though that is important, nor is it only felt by the heart, though that is crucial. Faithful wisdom is both of these things and then, more, it is engaged through active participation. By taking on the fullness of the role and responsibility which comes with it. As Chelsey Harmon writes, “God wants us to participate, take responsibility for ourselves, to be involved and present and aware of the needs of the world around us. We cannot look to others to do the life of faith for us” (*Center for Excellence in Preaching*).

That is not to say that we shouldn’t support one another. Absolutely, we should, and much of our gospels remind us and exhort us to support and lift one another up with the gifts we have received. But charity without our lives of faith to support it is also not the fullness of what we are called upon to embody in this world. Indeed, Harmon goes on to remark, “God often wants us to share with one another and God’s kingdom economics means that there are enough resources for everyone if we do so. But that’s not what *this* parable is about. It’s about what we do as we wait for the bridegroom of the world to return” (*ibid,* emphasis mine).

The exhortation to choose faithful wisdom is to begin with our own selves, our own families and households, to commit to serve the Lord. And then, through that choice, to see God’s kingdom realized in the world around us. But it is our own choice, first. Joshua knew the truth of this, and so the ultimatum went to each and every person, each and every household. “Choose this day, whom you will serve, whether it will be the gods of your ancestors or the Lord.”

This particular parable of Jesus reminds us, as well, that we cannot outsource our faith to another; we must claim it as our own, each and every day. Only in this way will we truly be disciples of life within and for this world. We are beginning to move toward the season of celebration in which we will watch and wait for, anticipate the arrival once more of the One who fulfills prophecies and fills full our lives. The choice, the invitation is before you again today. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)