

Matthew 25:1-13 The Oil in the Lamp
November 12, 2023

It is that time of year again. The leaves are dull and faded and mostly on the ground. The clocks have been set back. Halloween is over and Thanksgiving is in the air and on the mind. It is the season of the year for thoughts about budgets and stewardship. Three weeks from today, on December 3rd, is the first Sunday of Advent. Only three more weeks!

In the lectionary, it is the time of the year to think about the end. Eschatology is the theological word for it, “words, or thoughts, about the last things.” Over the years a large cottage industry has developed that is devoted to this conversation, and many readers of the bible claim to know how to read the signs of the times. Up to the present, those who prognosticate about such things have all been wrong, so it would seem appropriate to encourage humility in this regard.

Bear with me while I make a movie reference that I found both comical and helpful. There is a great scene in the old Hitchcock movie, *The Birds*, that presents people making various responses to what in the movie is a unique and stressful, albeit strange, circumstance. I refer to this scene because the responses are generally common.

As you may know if you have seen the movie, and the statute of limitations on spoiler alerts has clearly run out, the movie depicts a small town that has been invaded by birds, which periodically attack in violent

and suspenseful ways. In the middle of the crisis the main characters and several of the townspeople find themselves in a diner at lunchtime. There is a conversation about the events outside in the town.

There is one who says, “I don’t believe it.” And another, “it doesn’t matter if you believe it, we have to *do* something about it, *now*.” There is an academic who says that birds have never been recorded as acting in this way so it is unlikely that they are now. A man at the counter says that birds are vile and deplorable creatures and should all be killed.

A woman in the corner who is eating lunch with her kids says, “could you talk about something else, you are frightening the children.” The academic, apparently responding to the man at the counter, says there are 583 billion birds in North America alone.

At some point, I think it is another woman, not the mother, notices Tippi Hedren and says, “this all started when *you* came to town. I think it is *your* fault. You must be *evil*.” Another man at the end of the counter repeats from time-to-time, “it is the end of the world.” The discussion goes back and forth rapid fire,

“I don’t believe it.” “We have to do something.” “It has never been recorded.” “Its the end of the world.” “Kill them all.” “Your frightening the children.” “583 Billion.” “you must be *evil*.” “Its the end of the world.”

The movie came out in 1963, before the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War and Watergate and the other crises of the era, and of course, before the crises of the present era, the War on Terror, the financial crash, the Covid pandemic, polarization, the wars in Ukraine, Israel. Yet it presents people acting in seemingly universal ways:

The frightened person who projects their fear onto the children; the out-of-touch intellectual; the denier, the pragmatic who just thinks something needs to be done; the one who wants to kill them all, the religious fanatic; the one who thinks there must be some evil person to blame; they are all there, and no one does their best thinking in a crisis, instead falling back on their default positions.

There is a place for “words and thoughts about the end,” a kind of diner for conversation. Though I caution restraint, the scriptures do address the topic. What can we learn from them? In the early days of the Christian faith, many people believed in the immediate end of the age. Both Jesus and Paul believed that *their* generation would witness the Day of the Lord, as it was sometimes called.

“Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom,” Jesus said (Matthew 16:28), and Paul said as much in 1st Corinthians when he claimed that the world in its present form is passing away, and there isn’t even time to think about getting married and having a family.

In 1st Thessalonians, we see evidence of the same idea, that *this* collection of believers, not in existence for more than a decade or so at the time, has begun to experience anxiety about the delay of Christ’s return.

Some of them had died and there was a question about what would happen to those who had “fallen asleep” before the “taking up” of all the others. Paul assured them simply that there was no problem, that whenever the end comes, *all* the believers will be included, and he told them to be encouraged. Since then, almost 2,000 years has passed and every generation of believers has, “fallen asleep in the Lord.”

But somehow that issue is not the most challenging. My suspicion is that most of us do not struggle over it. The bigger challenge is expressed in the Old Testament and the Gospel readings for the day. The text from the Book of Joshua was not read, but the central quotation is found in the order of service at the top;

“Choose this day, whom you will serve,” was Joshua’s challenge to the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land. And he was hard on them. He told them he didn’t think they would be able to serve faithfully. In view of their times, he might have been right. What does it mean to serve God faithfully?

The Gospel reading lends a sense of urgency, expressed in terms of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. We know the story. There was a wedding, and the tradition that is presented is that once a

couple was betrothed, the groom, in his own time and his own authority, would arrive at the bride's household. At his arrival there would be a celebration and then the couple would travel to the groom's home where the bride would become a part of *his* household.

No one knew exactly when he might arrive, so, especially if he arrived at night, they had to be awake and ready to light him on his way. There were ten bridesmaids, each waiting with their lamps. Five had an adequate supply of oil, five did not. When the bridegroom arrived, five were away buying oil, and they missed it. They were not allowed into the celebration.

Obviously, this story is a metaphor of Christ's return and is an exhortation; to be awake (that is, and I hate to say it, woke) to be prepared; and the metaphor of preparation is to have oil for the lamps. What does it mean for us, all these millennia later, to be awake and prepared? What is the meaning of the oil in the lamp?

Clearly this parable presents a sort of contrived setting. In real life, each must sleep and eat, and live out their days taking care of the tasks of life. One can't predict even their own end, much less Christ's return and *the* end, or the consummation of the age. There have been crises that take the breath away, but did not turn out to be the end of the world.

Although the parable itself is not specific, the bible offers many exhortations and encouragements that

reveal everything that we need to know, to keep us from the being too worried about these things, or acting in ways that are not helpful.

You know the kinds of things I am going to say. Contrast them to the people in the diner. First of all, there is no reason to be concerned about dates and times. Preparedness means to pay attention to what kind of people we become, and how we live our lives. To be ready is to live faithfully, and to do everything in accordance with the rule of love.

Aware of our failures and limitations and shortcomings, we are to rely upon God's grace, which gives us the assurance of salvation. We are to be concerned about our neighbors and ready to help when the opportunity arises; to act with honesty and integrity, compassion and kindness and generosity, humility and restraint. It bears mentioning that we can assume the best about people and circumstances; not because we trust the people *or* the circumstances, but because we trust God.

For, in the language from Joshua, we have chosen to serve the Lord. Let us be caught in the act, of that service until it becomes our default position. Faith is our default position. This faith will keep us from anxiety, and from runaway thoughts and bad decisions. It may be thought of as the oil in our lamps.

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