

Light at Midnight
Matthew 25:1-13
November 4, 2014
SEMN Synod Theological Conference

It was about 20 years ago. A church member stopped by and asked, “Pastor, have you read this new book, *Left Behind*?” No, I hadn’t. “Oh, Pastor, you have to read it; it really makes clear what the Bible says about how things are going to be at the end of the world; if everybody were to read this, they’d see why you better accept Jesus before it’s too late.” Well, wouldn’t you know, she *left behind* a copy for me to read.

So I took it along on a ski trip to Montana. I can still remember sitting up at night reading in this place that had lots of windows. I was actually kind of scared because I thought this was a rather frightening book – people disappearing from airplanes, cars crashing into each other after their drivers had been raptured off to heaven, the United Nations being hijacked by the antichrist who uses it to take over the world now that there are no true Christians *left behind* on earth to stop him.

After reading the book I thought to myself, “If the second coming of Jesus is even remotely close to the picture of God presented in this novel as a vindictive judge, we should all be frightened.” I found it comforting to remember that the book is fiction; interesting reading but, thank God, fiction.

When I returned home, the person who had *left behind* the book asked me what I thought of the book and its predictions about the end times. “Well,” I said, “it made for some interesting reading, but I’m glad it’s fiction.” Not the answer she wanted to hear. I’m pretty sure that she thought using a book like *Left Behind* might be an effective way to recruit people into the church. After all, who wants to be *left behind* to face a time of frightening tribulation while your neighbors are basking in heavenly bliss? You’d better turn to Jesus so you’re not *left behind*, out in the cold, excluded from the kingdom that is coming.

As much as I disagree with this brand of fear-based faith, when you hear words like those in today’s First Reading (Amos 5:18-24) about the day of the Lord being a day of darkness, or like being chased by a lion, only to be met by a bear, and finally making it into the safety of your house where you rest against the wall only to be bitten by a snake. Or when you read a story like today’s gospel lesson, it’s easy to see where this fear-based brand of faith comes from. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. The foolish ones don’t plan ahead – they do not bring extra oil for their lamps. The wise ones are ready. When the bridegroom comes, a little later than expected, the five wise bridesmaids go with him into the wedding banquet. The five foolish ones, however, have to run off and buy some oil. By the time they get back the door has been shut and they are left out in the cold dark night. (To be honest, I’ve always thought it was rather selfish of the wise bridesmaids not to share their oil with the others).

At first glance it might seem like the *Left Behind* crowd might have it right. Maybe Jesus is coming to give unbelievers the vindictive judgment they have coming. Maybe Jesus is even threatening us believers; telling us that we have not really been watching with enough intensity for the end times.

But, neither of those is really the point of the parable. Note that all ten of the bridesmaids were waiting for the bridegroom – that’s supposed be Jesus – to come. All ten of them were believers who wanted him to show up. The parable is not directed at unbelievers. And the parable is not directed at Christians who supposedly are not watching intently enough for the kingdom of God. Note that all ten of the bridesmaids fall asleep. And they are not criticized for that. The only real difference between the two groups is that one group anticipated that the bridegroom might be delayed and prepared for it. They didn’t wait for midnight to come before filling up on extra fuel for their lamps. They filled up long before the sun went down and darkness took its place. How they fared in the darkness was largely a result of what they did before the sun went down.

This story that Jesus tells is not so much about getting ready for the end times. Rather, this story that Jesus tells is about continuing to live in a way that shows that we trust the promises of God even when they seem slow in coming, even when God seems rather distant.

When the darkness of Nazi Germany fell across southern France during World War II, the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon provided shelter to more than five thousand Jews, saving them from the death camps. In a documentary about this, the interviewer sought to identify some dramatic moment of decision among the villagers to hide Jews after the German army had occupied southern France. The interviewer was surprised to hear the villagers explain their actions by saying, “It happened quite simply. The Bible says to feed the hungry and to visit the sick. It’s a normal thing to do. I guess we were used to it.”

This story that Jesus tells is about continuing to live in a way that shows that we trust the promises of God even when they seem slow in coming, even when God seems rather distant.

The theologian Edmund Steimle, in *From Death to Birth*, wrote: “It may be that God speaks to us most clearly and is closest to us simply in the awareness of his absence....For isn’t it so that the only time we can know that his “grace is sufficient” is precisely when he’s not at our beck and call? I suspect that if we in the church are going to be heard by those outside the church, we’d better make it crystal clear that our faith includes our experiences of God absent as well as present; that we know, as they do, what it means to live in a world which gives precious little evidence of the presence or reality of God. Maybe then they’ll listen for a change.”

This story that Jesus tells is about continuing to live in a way that shows that we trust the promises of God even when they seem slow in coming, even when God seems rather distant.

Maybe it’s easier to believe that God is keeping his promise to usher in a new world when the economy is on the upswing, or when your relationships are going well, or when you see hungry children being fed, or when you see a family member being healed as the result of successful medical treatment.

But when it’s midnight, and you have been waiting for a few extra dollars to get you out of that financial hole in which you find yourself, or you have been waiting for something to change in a relationship that seems beyond repair, or when you see hungry children continuing to go hungry, or when you sit with the doctor—like I did on that day we know as 9/11, with planes crashing, and buildings crumbling, and people dying—as I sat there in that doctor’s office at the Mayo Clinic with my brother Pete and his wife and the doctor reluctantly said to Pete’s

wife that “there is nothing more we can do except to keep you comfortable until you die;” at times like that, when God seems so distant, it can be much more difficult to live in a way that shows that we trust the promises of God. It is at times like that, when it’s midnight, and God seems so slow in coming, it is at such times that we draw on the fuel—the oil— that has been stored up and now gives light to the darkness that is within our hearts.

That fuel, that oil, that brings light at midnight is the good news we heard in that Second Reading (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), that because Jesus died and rose again we can rest assured that God will gather all of us to himself; that good news of God’s grace and love that first came to us in the waters of Baptism, and that continues to come to us in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and in the reading and hearing of the scriptures, and in the comfort of the gathered community of faith. All these years God has been pouring this fuel into our hearts and lives, letting it become a part of our DNA, so that when midnight comes we can draw on this fuel, this oil, that brings light at midnight, and keeps the flame of faith burning within the lamp of our hearts, and enables us, as we are about to sing (ELW 669, “Rise Up, O Saints of God”):

To rise up as saints of God, and proclaim a word of hope,
And stretch forth a hand of healing, and sustain the weak with love.
And keep doing it even in the midst of the darkness,
And keep doing it until that day when God gathers all of us to himself.

Please pray with me: O God of justice and love, your justice and love are not always so evident in our world. Sometimes we wonder if you will fulfill your promises. Sometimes you seem so distant. Sometimes it seems like midnight. May the life and words of your Son Jesus bring light at midnight, bring light to the darkness, and enable us to live as your servants, bringing hope and healing into the lives of those around us, until that day when we see you face to face, and live for all eternity in the presence of your grace. Amen.