

Rev. Lisa Schrott
2-27-22 Jazz Sunday
Matthew 25: 1-13
Living Stories: Keep Your Lamps Trimmed

It feels like it was just yesterday when we were preparing for Christ's birth in the season of Advent. This coming week we begin another season of preparation – the season of Lent. Lent prepares us for the journey to the cross and empty tomb, where we mark the death and resurrection of Christ, God's act of salvation love. To help turn our minds to Lent, today we hear a passage of scripture – a parable- about preparing for the glory of the Lord.

This parable – the parable of the oil lamps - is part of the fifth, and last, great discourse or sermon Jesus gives to his disciples and gathered crowds. Jesus is in Jerusalem when he shares this parable, having already experienced the triumphal entry we celebrate on Palm Sunday. So hear these words from the 25th chapter of Matthew in their context as the last of the Jesus' teachings to his disciples, a story of preparation.

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But the Lord replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

"What we play is life." The words of preparation in the bulletin from Louis Armstrong sum up so much of jazz – especially jazz coming from New Orleans. Among his many talents – make sure to read the music notes at the end of the bulletin Marlene put together, Armstrong was noted for being a master of improvisation – bending the lyrics and melody of a song. He was also a master of scat singing – the vocal improvisation technique characterized by wordless vocals, nonsense syllables or without words at all – the voice becoming an instrument. New Orleans is a city built on improvisation – inventing and reinventing itself; cultures mixing like the jambalaya and gumbo that really are the staples of life in Louisiana. In Louisiana gumbo is a food of improvisation is made from whatever you have on hand – whatever you caught in the waters or whatever animals were handy, or had come up in the garden. Like the wise

maidens in the parable, the making of gumbo requires you to be alert to the world around you, lest you be caught with a stew pot and nothing to put into it.

I learned a lot about the importance of keeping alert in the years I celebrated Mardi Gras while living in Louisiana. As much as I love the tradition of King Cakes – found everywhere from Epiphany to Fat Tuesday (and which you will get to experience after the service today), my favorite tradition, however, is the parades, held across multiple weekends– floats and marching bands and the throws of beads and stuffed animals and other trinkets. Yes – you must stay alert when there are strands of beads being thrown at your head. My favorite Shreveport Mardi Gras parade was the Highland Parade. It is a neighborhood parade in the best sense of the word, with trailers pulling homemade floats, groups of neighborhood kids with bikes festooned, local politicians in convertibles, bands and musical groups across ages and music types. But the best part of the Highland Parade are the throws. Yes – there are beads, and plastic cups and random stuffed animals, but there is also the guy that throws wrapped up hot dogs (my husband Brian’s personal favorite), and there are moon pies, and twinkies, and yes, Ramen noodles. You can make whole meals from what you catch at the parade. Hidden in the traditions and rituals and the fun of the Mardi Gras parades is a foreshadowing of the parade that leads to the cross – the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – palm branches waving. The adoration of the humble Jesus entering Jerusalem on the donkey becomes the mocking and death of Christ the King. Jesus knows that this turn of events requires some preparation, for the ending is not what it seems at first glance. So parables like the oil lamps that remind us to keep our lamps trimmed and ready are important.

This message of being both prepared and patient was key for Jesus’ disciples, for they were about to experience something that preparing for seems incomprehensible. Be prepared and be ready. When it seems like I have been gone and you are afraid I won’t return, be patient for I am coming back, and those who are ready will join me at the banquet.

The narratives and parables about being patient and prepared and remaining hopeful spoke not just to the disciples, but also to people oppressed and enslaved throughout history, who were waiting and yearning for freedom. As we have been exploring over the last few weeks, the hope of those enslaved was powerfully connected to the words of scripture – words that spoke to their lives of bondage. Scriptures that told of a king who was mighty enough that he could defeat death. Jesus was born a baby, yes, but he was also a king. The story is indeed bigger – bigger than whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Like parables, spirituals also have many layers. Scholars note the idea of a double deliverance – freedom that awaits one in heaven and faith that one might be delivered from slavery. We are going to prepare to escape, so you must be ready. *“The time is drawing nigh.”* Moreover, spirituals such as “Keep Your Lamps!” were used by the Underground Railroad to conceal messages. In this context, someone enslaved must maintain vigilance and watch for a conductor (a person who moved people to new locations). *“Children, don’t*

get weary” could refer to the long journey that one would endure while traveling to a free state on the Underground Railroad, as well as the command to keep alert for the return of Christ. As we sing this song later in the service and pay attention to the double meanings.

Following the sermon we will hear the jazz anthem “What a Wonderful World.” As Marlene notes, the composer Bob Thiel wrote that this song was intended as a reassuring antidote to the mounting problems facing America in the late 60’s; a time defined by what he described as the deepening national traumas of the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, racial strife, and turmoil everywhere. As the composer notes, this is not a Pollyanna viewpoint – not a rainbows and unicorns view of the world. Rather as Armstrong in his twilight years related, it told a story of possibility. “It seems to me, it ain’t the world that’s so bad, but what we’re doing to it”, he said on the introduction to his 1970 version of the song. “All I’m saying is, see what a wonderful world it would be, if only we’d give it a chance.”

As I watching the heroic acts of the people in the Ukraine this week, I kept coming back to the idea behind this song. Written at a time when there was so much turmoil, when people genuinely were not sure of what the future would hold, I was seeing the faces of the people around the world praying for peace; people marching for peace; from the famous – athletes and musicians to the children of Russian oligarchs to moms and dad and grandparents and people of every walk of life who are banding together and saying no to the forceful takeover of a sovereign nation. Much like our parable today, I was seeing people who were preparing for long nights, but unlike our parable they are sharing - sharing their oil and their food with each other; they are sharing their courage and their hope, their dignity and their will for freedom with the entire world. They are sharing their dreams of the wonderful world we are called to live in as beloved children of God.

“What a Wonderful World” was the song Brian and I danced to at our wedding reception, so it has a special place in my heart. And while we had a calypso steel drum band playing, so it had a different feel – a bit more Jamaica than New Orleans – it nonetheless was a part of the promise we were making to each other. As I was thinking about that day almost 23 years ago, I remembered one of the unusual wedding gifts we received – a set of wooden Ukrainian Easter eggs from one of my dad’s coworkers and good friends. These eggs – known in Ukrainian as pysankas are not only beautiful works of art, but they also reflect a deep tradition and culture -dating back to the pre-Christian era and a representation of the new life that came each spring. With the advent of Christianity, the egg symbolized the new life we through the resurrection of Christ. Pysankys are labors of love, painstakingly created with intricate details.

As I was reading more about these eggs this week, I was struck by the significance the tradition - pysanka are given with symbolic meanings in mind, be it wishes of protection, fertility, productivity, or love. To give a pysanka is to give a symbolic gift of life; to give a symbolic gift of light in the darkness; to give a gift of oil to keep the lamps burning, for you do

not know the day or hour when you will need to draw on your strength and your faith; when you will need to draw on the reserves of your local community and even strangers around the world. We are all part of a bigger story, the many layered story of faith. None of us have a single story – we are complex and complicated and nuanced. We are charged to live expectantly and hopefully. And patiently. It may seem like we are in a holding pattern like the maidens, but we have a choice as to whether we live with hope in our hearts, keeping our lamps full of oil and our wicks trimmed and ready – doing the work Christ calls us to. The hard work in front of us –to work for justice for all, to serve with compassion, to be a force for reconciliation rather than division, and to share that God’s love is for all, no matter who you are or where you come from. The good news of God’s redeeming love and grace can seem fragile in the face of the world we see around us. And living patiently in faith does not mean we close our eyes to these challenges or hope that there is a wise maiden nearby to share their oil. But instead it means that we dig deep, do the heavy lifting to prepare ourselves, and live confidently and expectantly, trusting that Jesus will soon fulfill his promise to usher a kingdom crowned with love and redemption.