

Matthew 25:1-13

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Proverbs 8: 22-31

²² The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.
²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

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“Wisdom in the Wind”
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What is wisdom and from whence does it come? The Bible is filled with things that are categorized as ‘wisdom tradition’ and has many proclaimed ‘wise’ teachings – so what do these passages teach us about wisdom? Growing up, I’ve always found this parable about the oil-less bridesmaids or ‘virgins’ in some traditions to be really, really, annoying. First of all, it is part of a list of eschatological parables concerning ‘the end times’ and how all people will be separated into heaven bound or, uhhhh, not, on account of whatever characteristic each parable entails. I also find it difficult because, I mean, it seems to me that it’s based on a capitalistic understanding of supply and demand economics. I’ve got oil, you don’t, so....tough cookies. I mean, these lamp-oil-hoarders just come off as really selfish, right? In addition, it’s ridiculous – I mean, Walmart is barely open at midnight, and everything else is *definitely* closed by 9 - how on earth is a 1st century oil-shop open at 12:00 in the morning? On top of that, this is some kind of wedding party where the groom shows up to the wedding banquet at midnight? Not to pass judgment, but I really don’t see this marriage lasting very long – the groom is nowhere near punctual and all of his friends are really selfish; the whole situation is just a mess.

But, this is Jesus that we're talking about – a guy that, 80% of the time, you should never ever take literally – otherwise, you'll be expecting oil shops to be open at midnight on any given day of the week. So, as I forced myself to try and work this passage – being that it is the lectionary reading for this Sunday and I'm a good Presbyterian – I found some interesting understandings that I think help to shed some light on a possible meaning that could be gleaned from this typical non-sensical Jesus parable.

In the Catholic lectionary, this passage is paired with a reading from the book of Wisdom – an aptly named book that is not part of the Protestant canon. But, I'll read you the passage from chapter 6, verse 12-16:

Resplendent and unfading is wisdom,
and she is readily perceived by those who love her,
and found by those who seek her.
She hastens to make herself known in anticipation of their desire;
Whoever watches for her at dawn shall not be disappointed,
for he shall find her sitting by his gate.
For taking thought of wisdom is the perfection of prudence,
and whoever for her sake keeps vigil
shall quickly be free from care;
because she makes her own rounds, seeking those worthy of her,
and graciously appears to them in the ways,
and meets them with all solicitude.

So, I began to wonder – how is it that a parable that seems to be exclusively focused on typical 'end of days' and 'Jesus' second coming' rhetoric has anything

to do with the book of Wisdom? Can we truly use the word ‘wise’ to describe the actions of any characters in this story?

The Book of Proverbs contains the iconic passage that describes Wisdom. In it, Wisdom exists before anything else, and she delights in Creation and in the human race. From the NRSV translation, she is described as a ‘master worker’ meaning that she works *with God* to build the foundations for life. One biblical commentator says that “Wisdom determines cosmic order and addresses human beings concerning that order, she is the prior condition for the existence and functioning of all things.” Meaning that Wisdom was there, at the beginning, before the beginning, creating with God and imbuing her being into the fabric of Creation – into the very fabric of Life itself.

“When there were no depths I was brought forth, Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, When the heavens were established – I was there.”

So then, part of you, part of me, and every part of Creation – was in some way a witness to the beginning of it all. The leaves that change colors and fall from the tree and the morning dew on the grass is full of Wisdom – she is on the wind as it flows across the planet – high above in the jet streams but also deep within the valleys; kissing the faces all who take the time to behold Her in a soft breeze.

Allow me to entertain you with another heretical reading from a different book from the Catholic Bible – in the book of 2 Esdras, there is a story about how the forest and the sea declare war upon the other. The Forest claims that it will rush into the sea and make the entire face of the earth a majestic, wooded landscape – and likewise the sea formulates a plan to flood the great forests, so that all the earth might be a sparkling, watery wonderland. But, the forest is consumed by fire, and it can progress no further. The sea attempts to push landward, but 2 Esdras says that “the sand stood up and stopped them.” The primary character in the book remarks on this, saying that – “Each made a foolish plan, for the land has been assigned to the forest, and the locale of the sea a place to carry its waves.” The wisdom that governs the tides and the cycle of the seasons is the same wisdom that governs you and me.

In the book of Job, when God descends from heaven in a mighty whirlwind and asks: “WERE YOU THERE AT THE BEGINNING?” The answer is: eh, sort of? For Wisdom was there at the beginning, and wisdom is still in the very air we breathe. Wisdom has seen it all, and she knows the patterns that define life, and can judge what is ‘good and just.’

Let’s bring this back around to Jesus – who I normally don’t talk about very often, but I will for you all. Jesus tells us, in the midst of parables concerning the end of all things and the eschaton, a story about some foolish people and some

wise people. What is it that delineates ‘wisdom’ here? Who is truly foolish? And who is truly wise? This parable is not told simply to stratify the human population into who gets to enter bliss, and who gets condemned to what we are told is apparently an existence with all sorts of teeth and gnashing. For in this parable, *everyone* falls asleep. Normally, Jesus *hates* sleeping – every time he walks off to do something **somebody** falls asleep. But here, both the wise and the foolish rest. To be wise does not mean to stand around, constantly awake, waiting and watching for Jesus to come back. In fact, some biblical scholars think the Greek for ‘keep awake’ at the end of this parable ought to be translated ‘be prepared.’

We see wisdom all around us, and it is constantly ‘doing’. The river flows, the leaves change, the squirrels bury acorns, the rain falls – all in preparation for the Kingdom of God here on earth. “Thy Kingdom Come.” To be prepared is to be *doing*. As one New Testament Scholar says: This parable “*opposes the frantic quest for eschatological information*” – *to know when and where and how ‘the end’ will occur. Rather, it pictures faithful and wise disciples as those who are prepared, who step out into the world and pursue love. And “such disciples can lie down to sleep in confidence, rather than being kept awake by panicky, last-minute anxiety.”*

But, we cannot be so quick to let these ‘oil-hoarders’ off the hook as ‘wise’ beings. I would argue that if these ‘wise ones’ were really wise, they would have

brought enough to share with those who weren't quite prepared, for that is the nature of the Good News – is it not?

Jesus calls us here to be wise – to be prepared. To prepare for Jesus is not to dust off our plaque with the text from John 3:16 on it, hang it on the door frame so everyone can see what great Christians we are, and then call it a day. But to prepare is to *be. Here. On earth.* To plant and cultivate seeds – to create life. To work for justice and love. Proclaim the Good News, right? Be prepared, my friends, be prepared to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked and all that – but also to examine why people are hungry and naked in the first place. And if we do that, then Jesus says we are wise.

And we can see this Wisdom all around us. She is in the faces of our neighbors, in the soil between our toes, and even in the pesky weeds. So then, plant your feet firmly on the earth, look to the east at sunrise, feel the wind as it moves across the earth, watch as the sun prepares for the new day, and feel its warmth upon your face – and then you will know the love of Jesus, and you will be filled with Wisdom.