



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

**From the Pulpit...**

## ***“Lamps Lit...Dressed for Action”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Matthew 25: 1-13; Luke 12: 35-40*

*October 21, 2018*

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit!” When we read that passage during Bible study on Wednesday evening we all got a bit of a chuckle as Mike Krosnosky read his 75 year old version of the Bible that proclaimed, ‘Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning.’ (There’s a reason they re-do these translations over the years.). But still, of all of the marital images that we explored in our studies this week it was that line that jumped out to me, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit!”

Now, I know I’m going to be mixing metaphors a bit this morning, but bear with me. When I read these stories of the wedding feast in Luke and the parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew, I can’t help but picture a runner at the start of a race. “On your marks...” the announcer calls out, “get set...Go!” In so many ways, I think that is the mindset that’s being reflected in these passages. The more I considered the implication of these Scriptures on the life of the Church the more I imagined those three stages: On your marks...get set...go!

You see, these passages in Matthew and Luke are alluding to what is known in the New Testament as the Parousia. “Parousia” is a Greek work that means arrival – and it often alluded to the arrival of a king, or some other dignitary, that required special celebration or recognition. In Scripture, however, the Parousia became equated with the second coming of Jesus...the return of the resurrected Christ to this earth. That’s what these passages are alluding to. When they talk about the return of the bridegroom to or from the wedding banquet, they are speaking to the Parousia...to the return of the resurrected Christ to this world. The challenge in those passages for those of us today, however, is that it’s been nearly 2,000 years and it hasn’t happened!

For those who were hearing Jesus at the time, and even for those who were first receiving these Gospels as they were first written, this was an event they thought was going to happen in their lifetime. The earliest Disciples...Peter, James, Paul...these people all thought that Jesus was going to return to earth in a matter of years, if not months. But, we stand here 2,000 years later and that immediacy is gone. Today, there are about as many theories about the nature of the second coming as there are theologians in the history of Christianity.

- Some see it as a literal event that will occur someday
- Some see it more metaphorically as representative of the heavenly realm.

- Others look at the Church as the manner in which Jesus returns, the list goes on and on.

But, the simple reality is that we don't anticipate that Jesus is going to walk through that door tomorrow morning – so that immediacy of living up to the commands of Jesus, so that we aren't 'caught' out of sorts, loses a bit of its impact on the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church.

But, when you strip all that away. When you take away the marital structures and practices of ancient Israel...when you loosen yourself of the threatening and consequential grip of worrying about being caught unready for Christ's return...when you set aside the theologizing of what that return might be...what you find is that these stories are telling us, the Church, that we need to be in the same place as that runner at the beginning of the race. "On your marks...get set...go!"

The first thing these servants and bridesmaids had to do was to be on their marks. They had to be tuned in. They had to be ready to respond when the moment came. They had to be watchful and aware enough that, when the moment came, they saw it and were able to respond. The Church, and we in the Church, must our lives on our marks. We have to be ready. We have to be tuned in. We have to be engaged in the presence of Christ in our lives that might actually notice the call when it comes.

- Are we worshipping God in a way, and with a regularity, that we are maintaining that connection we have with the divine?
- Are we praying with enough intent and sincerity that we are nurturing that pathway through which God might breath wisdom, purpose or will into our lives?
- Are we opening our Bibles and engaging Scripture with sufficient thought and heart that God's Spirit can speak to us through the living word and open us to new understandings and revelations of his love and presence in our lives?

As individuals, and as a Church, we have to be on our marks. In prayer, worship, study, dialog, reflection, meditation and any of a thousand other modes and modalities we have to build, strengthen and nurture our connection to God in Christ...our engagement with the Spirit...that we might actually awaken and know when the call to action arrives.

Then, tuned in and on our marks, we have to get set. This is where we come to that line in Luke, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit!" In Matthew's story it comes out in a slightly different way, but the message is the same. I think it's easy to get distracted by some of the details of the parable when it comes to the wise and unwise maidens. They all have their lamps that need to be lit and trimmed as they welcome the bridegroom, and five of them prepared while five didn't. It's easy to get distracted by the wise maidens turning their backs on the foolish ones...*'We can't give you our oil, go get your own!'* And it's easy to get distracted by the bridegroom (Jesus, in our minds) slamming the door in the face of those who were unprepared. But, I think our straining over the negative connotations causes us to miss the underlying point that we need to be prepared.

Our other reading in the marital images for this week came from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. In that letter Paul speaks of the Church as a bride of Christ. He talks about his commitment to present the Church to Jesus as a, 'chaste virgin.' But, what's striking about the imagery that Paul uses there is that the chastity, the purity, alludes to the fact that there is one

person and one person only to whom the bride gives herself over. So, when Paul begins to talk about presenting the Church to Jesus as a chaste virgin, what he is talking about is the underlying truth that the Church should be giving itself over to no one and nothing but Christ. That's the purity of the Church – that the motivation, the driving force, the will, the guidance, the heart that beats as the rhythm of the Church is Christ, and Christ alone. That, I suggest, is what it means for the church to be set.

- Have we made room in our busy lives to allow Christ to be at the center of who are and what we do?
- Have we made room in our minds for the wisdom of the Spirit to push us beyond our boxed in traditions and the comfortable familiarities of our routines?
- Have we made room in our hearts for the priorities and will of God to overtake those of our frail humanity?

In life, and in Church, there is a mind-numbing amount of temptation to compromise our chastity by turning ourselves over to the forces and motivations that draw us away from the mind of Christ. Tuned in and on our marks, we have to get set...we have to position ourselves...we have to engage our faith and train our hearts that we are emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually prepared to respond when the starting gun sounds. And, then, we go!

I'm not sure what to say about this last part other than that! As you look at the stories of the servants waiting for their master's return in Luke, or that of the wise and foolish maidens in Matthew, what you see is that the moment he came – they jumped. There was no hesitation...there was no reticence...there was no evasion...there was, simply, response. When the time to act arrived, they acted...period! In our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives of compounding responsibilities, combatting priorities, and mounting obligations, we have become masters of equivocation.

- 'This is not the right time.'
- 'Next year I'll be more ready.'
- 'I just don't think I'm the one for that.'
- 'My mother is ill...My work is too busy...My kids are too active...'

I could go on and on and on...and believe me, I understand. And, I'm not talking here about calls from our Nominating Committee, your local non-profit board, or your kids' PTO. I'm talking about that call of God. I'm talking about the moment that is presented to us to be an active part of God's kingdom. I'm talking about how we respond when Christ is walking towards our door and calling us to come out.

There are as many understandings of the second coming of Christ as there are theologians in the history of Christianity. But, I don't think this passage limits its truth to some ethereal advent of someday. For the readers and hearers of the time, this passage had an immediacy because it spoke to an event they believed would take place in the course of their lifetime. What I think we miss, however, is that immediacy is just as present for us. Because, that call is coming. In my life, in your life, in our life as a Church, the moment in which we are called out to be a part of what God is doing in his kingdom has come, is coming, and will come again...because there is no end to what God longs to do in and through our lives as individuals, or in and through our life

as a Church. We may not expect his physical presence to come marching through that door this week, but we very well should expect that his voice will be calling us through it at any moment.

So, as individuals, and as a Church, we need to constantly be asking ourselves those questions.

- Are we on our marks?
  - Are we tuned in? Are we nurturing our spiritual connection to God in a way that when his Spirit works in our lives we will see it? Are we committing ourselves to engaging in prayer, worship and study that when the voice is calling, we hear it?
- Are we set?
  - Have we made room for the Divine in our lives? Have we set our priorities aside as second to those of Christ himself? Are we submitting our will to that of the wisdom of the Spirit?
- And, will we go?
  - When that moment comes, tuned in and prepared, will we have the faith to go? Will we trust in God's guidance and provision? Will we leap to the action to which God is calling us? Or, will we equivocate, rebuff and procrastinate in deference to the fears and worries that so often overtake us.

“Be dressed for action, and have your lamps lit!” In the end, it really boils down to that. The call is coming...the voice is calling...God's kingdom is waiting for you, for us, to play a new part towards which the Spirit is guiding. The question is whether we are tuned in, prepared, and girded in faith enough to go.