

**Sermon Title:** Be Prepared for the Long Haul  
Matthew 25:1-13 NIV (The Parable of the Bridesmaids)

25 “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

6 “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

7 “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

9 “ ‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

10 “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

11 “Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’

12 “But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

13 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Towards the end of the summer, my son invited some of his friends to join him at our family’s cabin for a few days. They did a good job staying safe, Covid-wise. When he invited them, he had two rules: First, when it came to keeping the cabin clean and good shape, what he says, goes. Second, each guy had to plan, purchase, and make dinner one night of the trip.

When he got home from the trip, I asked him how it went. His reply: “Here comes the monkey bus.” When I asked him what he meant, he explained that as much as these guys all wanted to go on the trip and were very clear about the Two Rules, one of the guys just had to get guitar practice in on the last morning of the trip when it was time to pack and clean. Another started formulating a menu for his assigned dinner two hours before dinner and two days after they had all done their grocery shopping in town. While my son wasn’t surprised that his two friends had planned not-to-plan, he was still annoyed.

As a father of sons, I can’t say I was surprised. To be a teenage guy is to be high on enthusiasm, low on preparation. So maybe when we listen to this story, we should think of it as the Parable of the Teenage Girls. All ten were excited to be going to a wedding celebration. All ten planned for the event by bringing their oil-filled lamps along. And all ten end up falling asleep. But only five of them were wise enough to bring extra oil.

All ten *planned*. Only five *prepared*. Planning is great, so far as it goes. Planning is what helps us succeed when things go as we expect them to, as we hope they will. But it’s a commitment to preparation that enables us to succeed when things don’t go according to plan.

The three parables that Jesus tells in Matthew 25 come at a crucial moment. Jesus knows what the disciples don't know. He knows that their trip to Jerusalem is going to turn out to be the worst days of their lives. He knows that the path and the pattern set before him includes death, then resurrection, then return to the Father. He knows he will not always be with them. And he knows he needs to give them guidance now so they will know what to do then. The guidance comes in the form of three stories. The bridegroom will be delayed in coming, *so be prepared*. The master will demand an accounting of what was entrusted to you, *so be purposeful*. The king will judge each of us based on how we treat "the least," *so be pleasing*.

In each story we are reminded that **it is through small acts that we are able to practice faith for the long haul.**

For the ten teenage girls, that meant having extra oil at the ready. What does it mean for us? What is our "extra oil"?

2020 continues to impress upon us the importance of preparing for the long haul. When we first encountered the implications of a Covid-19, we spoke of it in terms of weeks or months. We are slowly accepting that it will take years for us to bring the pandemic under control. Likewise with a return to pre-Covid employment levels. We were repeatedly told that the results of the presidential election would not be known by the end of election night. It has indeed taken several days to complete the vote counting in closely contested states. As I prepared this message, we still didn't know who the next president will be. And the wise among us already know there is a long road and a lot of hard work in front of us, regardless of who sits in the Oval Office. If ever there was a time for long haul thinking, long haul living, and loving haul *loving* – it is now.

To live faithfully over the long haul, we need to acknowledge that we will all get fatigued and experience times of failure. **Falling asleep is a way of thinking about inevitable failure. It can't be avoided.** Isn't this an amazing word of grace from our Lord? He knows that we will fail sometimes. Our enthusiasm for serving Jesus will flag sometimes. We will lose heart sometimes, and give up hope sometimes. Sometimes laziness or boredom or cynicism will get the best of us. It's okay. It happens.

But that is why spiritual practices are so important. Taking time to pray each day, to read or listen to scripture, to get up from your screen and spend time outside in God's creation... these are all small actions that have a powerful effect over the long haul. To experience God in small ways and in the seemingly unimportant moments makes it possible to experience God in the big moments – the moments of personal crisis and the time of historical significance like we are living in now.

Jesus' story reminds us that when it comes to the oil of faith, we can't borrow from someone else. My grandfather's faith may have been an inspiration to me while I was growing up, but it won't help me now. Now, I need my own oil. My wife may be "the praying one in the family" but there is no faith-by-proxy over the long haul. My prayer life is what will matter when the

Bridegroom comes. How awful it must be to come to the end of one's life and too face death long after your faithful spouse has already gone off to be with God! Each of us must cultivate our own relationship with God. *Each of us must walk our own journey, with our own lamps and own oil.*

How is your oil supply right now? What might Jesus be saying to you?

Just because we must each walk our own journey, that does not mean we walk it alone. Spiritual friendships – or what we church folks call fellowship – is also a critically important way to invest in oil. Once it became clear that sheltering in place was not going to be over in a few weeks, the Session recognized that we needed to find ways to stay connected, to keep encouraging each other. We started Ten25 Groups in recognition that believing friends drifting apart is not a new phenomenon, but as old as the church itself. Hebrews 10:25 urges us to “not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.” Actually verses 23 and 24 build out the picture of what spiritual friendships are and why they are so important:

*Hebrews 10:23-25 NIV*

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

When the church is truly being the church, it a place of encouragement and challenge – a place in which we both worship God for who God is and then spur each other on to be all the God intends for us to be – lovers and good-deed-doers. Jesus called such people salt and light. When I join Zoom calls throughout the week – the Ten25 groups, the Thursday morning men's study, the after church coffee hour, and even the “business” meetings like staff check-in and Session meetings – I am always encouraged by the ways the people of West Valley encourage each other and keep praying for each other.

There is a phrase we like to use in church: “If the Lord tarryes.” We trust that our Lord Jesus will return and that the kingdom he promises will be fully realized “on earth as it is in heaven.” Generation after generation has waited upon the Lord's return for two millennia. Jesus, obliquely identifying himself as the bridegroom, told us it would be a long wait. And even within our own lives, each of us has waiting on the Lord to rescue, or provide, or heal and wondered, “Where are you Lord? Why are you taking so long?” Yet Jesus told us the wait would be longer than we expected. We have both been let down by the Lord's tarrying and we have worried that we might let our Lord down. But this waiting time is not wasted time. The Lord tarryes that all may be saved. The Lord tarryes in order to create space and time for our growth and our maturing. The one who promises IS faithful. The Bridegroom will come, and the celebration will begin. Will you be ready? Have you brought enough oil?

Amen.