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Emmanuel Lutheran Church
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Renata & John Wedding;
Lancaster PA

Texts: Amos 5:18-24; Ps. 70; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Matt. 25:1-13

Focus: The Second Coming of Christ/Renata & John's Wedding

Function: Keep your lamps trimmed and burning

Amos 5:18-24

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!

Why do you want the day of the Lord?

It is darkness, not light;

as if someone fled from a lion,

and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,

and was bitten by a snake.

Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

1 Thess. 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 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, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 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." 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. Later the other

bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

PRAY

Last winter, Renata called and asked if I would preach at her father’s church the day after her wedding. I was honored and thrilled. Renata has told me a lot about this congregation, and I know that her childhood in this church helped shaped the person she’s become—the kind of friend she is; the way she takes care of other people. I also knew that a lot of wedding guests would be here—some of you are old friends of mine, others I’ve just met. It’s been wonderful to be among a group of people who share the joy of having John and Renata in our lives.

During our initial phone call about the worship service, Renata and I decided, just for fun, to check the lectionary—the church’s calendar of scripture readings--to see what the assigned text would be for today. You can imagine our delight when we discovered that it was this parable. The wise and foolish bridesmaids! Perfect for a wedding, right? The sermon would pretty much just write itself.

I figured I’d start with the jokes. So I rented the movie Bridesmaids, but it turned out that that was a colossal waste of time, because not a single joke in that movie is appropriate to a service of Christian worship.

So I sat down to study the story itself, this parable Jesus tells of the ten bridesmaids, five wise and five foolish, awaiting the groom's arrival. It's late, and dark, and the wise ones brought extra oil for their lamps, but the foolish ones did not. At midnight, when the groom's arrival is announced, the fools say, "Quick! Give us some of your oil," but the wise say, "No, get your own." While the fools are at the shop, the groom arrives, the party goes into the wedding banquet, and the fools find themselves shut out.

I tried to think of ways to relate this story to the context of a modern-day wedding. But a lot of the details just don't make sense. Why is the groom late? What's he doing hanging out with ten bridesmaids? Where's the bride?

And, when they go off to fill their lamps, where do the foolish bridesmaids get oil in the middle of the night? In the modern world, when bridesmaids need last-minute supplies—say, hypothetically, to do some emergency tailoring of the bridal gown—they could just go to the nearest Joanne Fabrics and be all set. But why, in ancient Judea, long before the era of 24-hour retails, would a shop selling oil be open at midnight?

PAUSE

It's hard to put together a coherent and realistic picture of what's going on here. The details just don't add up. And here's why:

This parable isn't about a wedding—not really. The wedding is only a metaphor. The wise and foolish bridesmaids represent believers, and the groom

whose return is delayed represents Jesus. What this parable is really about is the Second Coming of Christ.

So here, in spite of my best efforts to avoid it, I'm going to have to talk about the Apocalypse. I have to tell you, it feels like a breach of etiquette. For you Lutherans out there, if you're anything like us Presbyterians, this piece of Christian doctrine sometimes feels embarrassing. We're not always comfortable talking about it—and yet here I am preaching on it when we've only just met. And for all you non-churchgoers out there, I'm playing right into the stereotype that Christians are a bunch of Rapture-obsessed end-times preppers. Besides, I didn't consult the etiquette books or anything, but it just seems like the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is right up there with politics and money as something it's not polite to talk about at weddings. On multiple fronts, this feels like a faux pas.

And yet, it's the theme of all of our scriptures today. In the Matthew text, the groom's arrival is a metaphor for Christ's triumphant return. First Thessalonians also describes an end-times moment, when the dead shall be raised and living believers shall be whisked up into the air—a favorite proof-text for proponents of the Rapture. The prophet Amos, from the Old Testament, foretells a frightening Day of the Lord in similarly apocalyptic language.

Our texts are about the imminent and looming end of days, and yet my tasks is to preach a word of hope to a newly married couple, their congregation, and their community. As I struggled with these scriptures, I asked myself, what's the Good News here? What do these passages have to tell us that is saving, hopeful, and redemptive?

I hope to get there, but first I want to set some context—to look at the words of the text in light of the world from which they came.

That's because early Christians expected that the Second Coming of Christ would be **sudden, soon, and scary**.

It would be **sudden**—it could occur at any time—it could come like a thief in the night—“keep watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

And yet many expected that the hour would be **soon**—likely even within the lifetime of the first disciples—and when that didn't happen there was a need to explain--hence Matthew's parable anticipating the groom's delay and encouraging continued watchfulness. Incidentally, since the end was going to happen at any moment, the apostle Paul saw marriage as a concession, something that single people could do if they were having trouble being celibate while they waited for Christ to come back. “If they're not exercising self-control, then they should marry,” he wrote to the Corinthians, “For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” Seems like pretty faint praise for the institution we're supposed to be celebrating today. But it's clear from this advice that Paul really did expect the end to come quite soon.

And finally, the language used to describe the Second Coming is often quite **scary**. Matthew's Gospel paints a frightening picture of wars, famines, earthquakes and plagues; a final judgment separating the sheep from the goats, the saved from the damned. In Amos' telling, the Day of the Lord is NOT something to look forward to. He uses those vivid and terrifying images—coming home to rest and being bitten by a snake; fleeing from a lion just to run smack into a bear.

All of this seems like a doomsday scenario--hard to reconcile with the God we affirm to be merciful and loving. I've been speaking somewhat lightly about

this, but some of these texts have done real harm. On the one hand, some believers use this apocalyptic vision to justify their own mistaken conviction that they're on the right side of history—that God will intervene with violence and therefore so can they. On the other hand, these texts can also do real spiritual harm to believers who internalize this language of damnation, who become convinced that Christ will shut the door on them, that God doesn't love them anymore. We sometimes forget that redemption in Christ has already been accomplished, and that salvation comes from grace alone, not our own efforts.

And yet, although these texts contain language that can be dangerous, I don't think we should be too quick to domesticate them entirely—to defang the snake of Amos' vision, or turn the bear into a teddy bear.

Here's why.

These texts were written by and for a community experiencing deep injustice and oppression. Many scholars believe that Matthew's Gospel was assembled following the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in 70 AD. It was addressed to a people who had just lived through unspeakable violence and witnessed the burning of their sacred Temple. And so these texts express the authors' firm conviction that God is a God of justice, that God stands against oppression. Given the state of the world around us, this is an important message for us to hear, too.

I think these apocalyptic stories have something important to tell us not just about the future, but about the present. Take an honest look at the world around us, and we see that injustice, oppression, and violence continue to plague humanity.

Immigrants and refugees persecuted and denied access on account of their religion. Ongoing revelations of widespread sexual harassment and assault. A morning worship service erupting in gunfire. The headlines tell us every day, sometimes more viscerally than others, that all is not right in the world.

I'm not saying that we should look at the signs of the times and proclaim that the end is near. I am saying that we should look at these apocalyptic stories in our Bible and see what they invite us to do. These end-times texts of scripture—they invite people of faith to acknowledge that the world as it is is not the world as it should be. And they invite us to see that God, who loves this world so much, is deeply concerned with the way that things are—that God has a different vision for how we can live together, a vision of justice and peace.

It was Martin Luther King who identified the hopefulness in the prophet Amos's vision, who lifted up, out of a difficult and challenging text, into a difficult and challenging time, that beautiful prayer: "Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

As the words and witness of Dr. King remind us, justice isn't something that we **wait** for—it's something that we **work** for. Faith doesn't mean that we simply fold our hands and close our eyes in quiet resignation. Faith means that we keep our lamps trimmed and burning. It means that, even as we look for God's glorious dawn to break forth into this often dark world of ours, we let our own lights shine.

So what does it look like to do this?

What does it look like, to be hopeful, when the state of the world might recommend despair? What does it look like to keep our lamps filled, to let our

lights shine? What does it look like to leave the comfort of our own homes and go out to search for our Savior in the street?

It might look like volunteering at a food bank or a homeless shelter. It might look like opening your church to a community of Nepali refugees who you find to be your neighbors. It might look like devoting your career to public interest. It might look like engaging in work for a cause that you believe in.

And with all due respect to the apostle Paul, it might even look like getting married. It might look like, in committing your life to another person, committing to be hopeful about all in them that is good. It might look like forming human community at its smallest scale—two people joined together in marriage—as an act of hope, a taste, right now, of the beloved community which is the future we claim for all humanity. It might look like trusting that God is on the side of justice, and trusting love will endure.

May it be so. Amen.