



What is God Saying? And How will We Respond?

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 11-1-20
Matthew 25:1-13, Amos 5:18-24*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

As I write and record this, it is Saturday. Joe Biden has just been declared the President-elect of the United States, and Kamala Harris the first woman and first African American woman as Vice-President-elect. There are still recounts and legal challenges to be faced, and the all-important question of whether President Trump will step down if those challenges make clear that he has lost. Almost everyone has big feelings about this, myself included. It is still unclear what this is a referendum about in our nation as a whole, given how very close the electoral college votes have been, and how relatively close even the popular votes have been.

Most moments in our lives and our nation are ordinary, more or less business as usual. This is not such a moment. This is a time of reckoning and a summons. It is a time that requires deep resilience. It is a time in each of us as individuals, and we as a community, must seek to rise to the occasion. Whatever we have done or not done in the past, now is the time for us to recognize, in the myriad chaotic voices and stories and deception and anxiety all around us, what is the voice of God saying? And how

will we respond?

The parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel reading is, as many such stories in Matthew, strange, dramatic, with a tinge of apocalyptic flavor in it. Ten bridesmaids are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom, and he is delayed. As the hours advance and the deep darkness of night descends, one by one, all ten of them fall asleep. And when at last after a much longer than expected wait THE moment of their duty arrives, only half of them—the wise ones, Jesus calls them—find they are adequately prepared. Now we shouldn't be too quick to throw the other half, the "foolish" ones, under the bus. They HAD been prepared for what was normal. They had enough oil to provide light for the schedule that had been set. But life did not go according to plan, and it caught them short. And Jesus is saying, there are some times in the life of the world and in the life of faith when being caught up short has significant consequences.

Now that is not a welcome thought. But let's dig deeper to find what can help us in this parable. We are all familiar with how life throws us curve balls. The year 2020 is one curve ball after another. We are exhausted. Whatever provides us nourishment in life as usual has long since either run out or ceased to be possible given the pandemic. We can't meet in person at church or receive the Eucharist together or experience the palpable presence of God that happens in the mix of singing and word and sacrament in our beautiful sanctuary. We can't meet with our dearest friends in person without fear, we can't visit our beloved aging parents in assisted living, we can't do so many things. People of color and those at the front lines of health care,

essential workers, are daily exposed to real risk. More than a quarter million people have died and nearly ten million people in our nation alone have gotten sick. The oil of everyday coping mechanisms has run out long ago. And here we are, in a time of reckoning, seeking light in the dark.

The old oil of what church has meant to us provided light of different kinds. For some it's love of the Anglican tradition, for some it's how St. John's is a family, for some it's the Way of Jesus and our hunger for spiritual practice, for others who are a little more squeamish about the Jesus or God aspects it's a place to be inspired to ethical living. But there are deeper needs than these to be faced. In times like this, to respond with any integrity at all to the multiple crises our nation and our democracy are facing, we need something more. I would go so far as to say we need a relationship with God that is so profound and so personal that it is a primary source of identity, purpose, and transformation, in order to rise to the occasion of these times and live without regret. The bridesmaids needed extra fuel for their lamps, a ready supply for those moments when their duty demanded more from them than usual, so that they could continue to have light in the dark. Earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven." Jesus also said earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, that they are wise who build their house on the rock, because such a house can withstand a storm; and they are foolish who build their house on the sand, because such a house will be swept away. What makes a person wise is not just hearing what Jesus says, but taking action on it. Foolishness is anything else—hearing and thinking

about it, hearing and keeping the Word at arm's length. Wisdom is hearing Jesus' words as if they were words of a lover or dear friend whispered in your ear that you immediately respond to and engage.

This difference between wisdom and foolishness lies at the heart of what it is truly to be a disciple of Jesus. But it's not even as simple as just doing your best to follow what Jesus teaches. As Episcopal lay leader Courtney Cowart expresses it, a disciple of Jesus is "one who practices abiding in Jesus' love,"¹ like the branches abide in the vine. And how do we abide in Jesus' love? By following the practices of the Way of Love—but not in a mechanical way. Instead, we practice from the place of having thrown oneself into the arms of the living God, and learning to listen to and respond to God's voice. The words of Jesus must become more than words we read on a page in a Bible. They must become living in our entire being, body, mind and spirit. They will inevitably lead us outside our doors, to care for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. They will inevitably lead us to deal with the sickness that is racism in ourselves and in our nation, even if that means we have to learn to connect with people across the aisle to love them and ourselves toward healing and justice.

This presence of God, the endless guidance we can receive from the Spirit of Jesus deeply inhabiting our own hearts, is like an endless river whose origin cannot be detected but which never runs dry. The Being of God is the source of the justice that rolls

¹ Courtney Cowart, in Courtney Cowart, ed., *Walking the Way of Love* (Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020) at xiv.

down like a river, like the streams that rush from the hills above Lake Superior, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream as the prophet Amos describes. This endless river is the inner experience of abiding in God's love, and its absolute outer counterpart that expresses itself as justice and righteousness. Without this river that never runs dry, all our usual church customs of worship—Eucharist, beautiful building, prayer book—will be worthless, even like the “festivals” and “solemn assemblies” God hates in the description of the prophet Amos. This is because our ordinary church habits and customs alone cannot create such love and justice in our characters and lives. But choosing to throw ourselves into the arms of God—to cultivate ears that ache to listen, that hunger to enact the life-giving guidance that is as precious as water in the desert—this is what will enable us at last to enact justice in a healing way, to enact justice that is an expression of love and not just righteous indignation. This is what will enable us as a predominantly white community to unlearn centuries of a culture that violently takes from people and the earth for our selfish benefit.

Howard Thurman was one of the most profound preachers, mystics and activists of the 20th century. He said this about learning to listen to the Voice of God, which he called the voice of the genuine:

There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself or himself.... If you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching ...and you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls . . .

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you. Don't be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams . . . because [the sound of the genuine in you] is the only true guide that you will ever have, and if you don't have that you don't have a thing.²

To heal a culture that has endorsed so much violence, we have to recover our own inner intuition that knows when something is wrong. We need the voice of the genuine, the voice of God, within us. This voice and presence of God is the oil that can keep our light burning even in the deepest darkness. The intimacy of abiding in the living presence of Jesus is the nourishment that can enable us to rise to the occasion. The practices of the Way of Love, taken and customized and made our own, will teach us how to live even in 2020 and the world it is birthing.

And if you are listening to this feeling burned out and unsure and hopeless—hallelujah! That's great! If you know you have run out, maybe God can finally get your attention as I think God is seeking to get my attention. We can walk together, each in our unique way, with our different perspectives and life experiences. We are not alone.

As soon as we can arrange it, I will be leading a 10-week group called *Spiritual Bootcamp in the Wilderness: Walking Jesus' Way of Love*. In this group we will be learning to take the practices of the Way of Love and craft our own rules of life from them,

² Howard Thurman, "The Sound of the Genuine," baccalaureate address at Spelman College, Atlanta, GA, May 4, 1980, quoted in Courtney Cowalt, *ibid.*, at xxi.

grounded in the intent to abide in the love of Jesus. This is intended to open ourselves to being wise disciples, taking Jesus' words and acting on them. It is intended to seek the nourishment from God that we so need in order follow the Spirit's call to center the work of racial justice and healing at St. John's. It will be the oil we bring for these times, when the bridegroom is delayed, and our normal resources have run out, and we finally know we need God beyond any shadow of a doubt. If you want to be part of this group, please email me.

As I conclude, I want to invite us all to a few moments of silence. Please become present to yourself as you actually are, in your totality, without judgment. Throw away everything you've ever learned, and listen with the ears of a child, a beginner. Where and how do you sense the presence of God? What is God saying to you? How will you respond?