

## **Sermon, November 8, 2020**

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friend Nan Gangler, who is providing Special Music for our worship. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume public worship. New pandemic cases, hospitalizations and deaths are at record highs. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshipping together even though safely apart. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is [stmarksoakland.com](http://stmarksoakland.com). You can also now donate through our Facebook page.

Our annual congregational meeting will be held next Sunday, November 15<sup>th</sup> at noon. Approving the 2021 budget is the only agenda item. It is a virtual meeting and you have been sent a zoom invitation. Please download the Zoom software ahead of time, if you haven't already. For those without Internet service, you have been mailed a copy of the budget and you can vote for or against it by sending a postcard or calling the church office. Also call the office if you have questions. Now today's stupid joke.

I ran into an old friend last week. I asked, "What's new?" She said, "I'm getting married again." I said, "Really? After you and Sam

divorced, you swore you would never do that.” She said, “Yeah I know. But I’m more mature now. And less self-centered. Besides, I need some new kitchen stuff.”

### *Music*

**The Lord be with you. Let us pray. O God of justice and love, you illumine our way through life with the words of your Son. Give us the light we need, and awaken us to the needs of others, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.**

A reading from Amos, the fifth chapter. 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 everflowing stream.

**Here ends the reading.**

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**The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-fifth chapter.**

[Jesus said to the disciples] "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**

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**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

Speaking of marriage and weddings, today's gospel reading from Matthew is once again about a wedding banquet. And we shouldn't be surprised, because Matthew mentions weddings, banquets, brides, bridesmaids and bridegrooms more than the other three gospels combined.

For the next few weeks we will be reading from the fifth and final sermon of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. It is usually called the "end times sermon." But thanks to the fancy words they taught me in seminary, I get to call it the, "eschatological discourse." (Impressed?)

To be honest, November has never been my favorite month to preach. Because as we close-in on the end of the church year, nearly all of our readings close-in on the end of the world. This is an especially awkward season for Lutheran preachers, because the last readings of this year all

seem to imply that one's eternal fate is ultimately determined by one's own behavior. Get it right, according to Matthew's Jesus, and you'll be rewarded. Get it wrong and there'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But frankly, that just doesn't sound very Lutheran. We profess salvation is by God's grace through faith. It's what Christ did for us that saves us. Not anything we ourselves do or for that matter don't do. That doesn't mean Lutherans don't TRY to do the right thing. Of course we do! We just realize that as human beings we will always come up short.

I checked the Lutheran Pastor's blog last week, and virtually nobody wanted to preach on today's parable about the bridesmaids, lamps and oil. Most found the parable odd, or at best confusing. And some wondered if we should be worrying about the end in the first place. We Lutherans aren't an end-times cult.

We know Jesus spent most of his time teaching us to how get along with each other in THIS world, and not so much trying to scare the bejeebies out of us about the so-called eschaton.

One of my colleagues said she was embarrassed to admit it, but she doesn't even know how to spell Armageddon." I said don't worry about it. It's not the end of the world.

Besides, doomsday preachers usually end up looking pretty silly in the end, don't they? Even the likes of --the Apostle Paul, in the assigned second reading, which I decided to skip over.

It comes from First Thessalonians, which is probably the earliest written work of the New Testament.

In it, Paul firmly believed the end times were imminent. He wrote to assure folks that their recently deceased friends and relatives will still get to be part of the kingdom, which is coming any day now.

Of course it didn't. And for that matter, fifty plus generations and two thousand years later it still hasn't.

And it's not just Paul. Many early Christians thought the end was imminent, especially after the temple and city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Romans and many Christians and Jews were slaughtered and scattered in the year 70. They just KNEW Jesus would be back soon. But... he wasn't.

Much of Europe expected the end to come at Y1K. Nope. When the Turks threatened to overrun Europe in Luther's sixteenth century Germany he was certain the end was near. Nuh-uh.

The Millerites—the nineteenth century American cult that evolved into what are today known as the Seventh Day Adventists, announced the end was coming in the spring of 1843. When it didn't, they thought, maybe spring of '44. Nope. Or maybe the fall. Nope.

Jehovah's Witnesses were sold on 1914, and that big war brewing in Europe sounded a lot like Armageddon to them. But of course it wasn't. The Hale Bopp Comet didn't bring the end of this world either, like the Heaven's Gate suicide cult thought. Neither did Y2K, the end of the Mayan calendar or the boatload of fear-mongering, misguided media preachers since.

Frankly I've never understood the obsession with the end times, or the popularity of the scary books and movies that promise and portray it. I've studied the Bible quite extensively, Old Testament and New, and I find it devotes a lot more ink to telling us how to live faithfully in THIS world, rather than how to brace ourselves for the scary stuff that will supposedly usher in the next one.

No, there's no denying that a few verses of the Bible DO point toward a coming new age of sorts. All were written in times of fear and suffering and religious persecution. The inspired authors wrote not to scare us, but to assure us that God still loves us and is with us, especially in times of trouble. And if and when the end DOES come don't worry; God has it covered. Everything will be fine.

So what do we do if it doesn't happen tomorrow? Or the next day, or week or month or year or millennium? Not sure? I suspect maybe that's why Jesus today told the awkward and confusing parable of the ten bridesmaids.

Yes, my fellow pastors are correct: it IS an odd little story. Especially if you don't know much about ancient Jewish wedding customs and practices. The Bible doesn't really say much on that subject. But- that doesn't mean I won't. First century Jewish marriages happened in two stages, the first of which was called the kiddushin or "betrothal."

The kiddushin was more or less a contract, setting a bride price or dowry usually drawn-up between the couples' fathers. Brides were typically quite young in first century Palestine, and grooms not much older. Maybe old enough to marry, but hardly old enough to negotiate contracts.

The second stage of the Jewish marriage began with the actual wedding ceremony, called the Nissuin. Nissu'in means "elevation," and that was the occasion on which the couple agreed to take their relationship to the next level by moving-in together.

The Kiddushin and the Nissu'in were separated by a fair amount of time—typically a year. For the latter, solemn vows were taken under a funny little canopy, today called the HUPpah by Sephardic Jews or CHOOpah by the Ashnekaz.

The canopy is still a part of Jewish weddings. It symbolizes the husband, wife, and their God, all coming together under one roof.

An elaborate wedding banquet typically follows the ceremony. In Jesus' many references to and parables about weddings, banquets, brides and grooms in Matthew, the Kiddushin, Nissuin and wedding banquet are metaphors for Christ's first coming, his second, followed by the great banquet of the heavenly feast.

Problem was, in Matthew's world a half century or more had passed since Jesus' first coming, and Christ the bridegroom still hadn't returned. And it is no coincidence that a delayed return is an important feature of all three of Jesus' final parables in Matthew.

Theirs was a world of persecution, suspicion, isolation and oppression, and there are hints that some were likely falling away from the faith. So where was Jesus? Was he coming back at all?

How should Matthew's community survive? And the answer was Simple. By being like the wise bridesmaids: patient and prepared to stay the course over the long haul.

In fact, Jesus spent most of his earthly ministry showing us and telling us how to do exactly that—how to live together in love and peace in THIS world. By honoring our God in what we do and say, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The meantime means accepting people as they are, even if they aren't like us. And helping those who could use a little help.

Because there will always be plenty of them around. Part of the planning for the long haul includes recognizing that judging others is God's domain, and not ours. And forgiving our debtors and those who trespass against us the way we expect God to do the same for us.

Of course the majority of Matthew's Mostly Jewish Christian first readers would have known much of that already. Because nearly eight hundred years before Jesus, a prophet named Amos—source of our FIRST reading-- had said pretty much the same thing.

I don't know who is in charge of devotions for the next worship and music committee meeting, but I hope they don't choose our first reading from Amos.

Especially the part where God said "I hate, I despise your festivals. I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." And choir practice will be a

real downer if it opens with God saying, “take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.”

Back in the troubled days of Amos, people were ALSO looking toward the end times and the coming, “Day of the Lord,” which was also likened to a heavenly banquet. They didn’t want to hear it when Amos told them that if they continued to neglect the needs of those around them who were struggling, the party’s off.

In chapter four the prophet criticized the self-absorbed wealthy women of Israel, calling them the “fat cows of Bashan who are addicted to too much wine,” ouch. I guess we shouldn’t be surprised that rabbinic writings say Amos died when King Uzziah struck him upside the head with a hot poker.

Apparently the King didn’t want to hear any more about God’s call to take care of the hungry, the poor, the sick and the marginalized. You see, it wasn’t so much that God had a beef with the Worship and Music committee. It was just that in light of the rich folks’ negligence and pre-occupation with their own self-interests, even their best efforts at worship were rendered hypocritical and insulting.

True worship and service to God aren’t just a matter of fancy prayers and songs. True worship and service to God means climbing down into the trenches of human suffering and seeing to the needs of our brothers and sisters who need help.

It’s doing the most for the least, and making the LAST of God’s people our FIRST priority. No, none of that could earn us a seat at the banquet. Jesus already took care of that. And because he did, when it finally DOES come time for us to knock, the door will indeed be opened. And the lamps of all of us—the rich and the poor; the wise the foolish; those prepared as well as those not so much—our lamps will be lit. Amen.

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