

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

Matthew 25:1-13

What happens when nothing happens during watch duty at night

Today, we remember and give thanks to all veterans who have courageously served this nation in times of need. While we should never romanticize war or sacralize military forces themselves, we should respect those who sacrifice their time and lives for peace and justice during time of war.

I can tell you that being in the military is very challenging. As you know, all Korean males have to serve in the military for 2 years. I still remember the chilly wind and restless sleep on my first day in the barracks. There are many difficulties being a soldier but what really bothered me was watch duty at night. Korean soldiers live in barracks and most soldiers are assigned to watch duty every day. They have to wake up in the middle of the night; wear a tactical uniform, carry their gun and equipment; move to their guard post and stand there for 1 hour regardless of the weather. After they have done their watch duty, they come back to the barracks, put their gear back in its place, change their cloths and try to fall asleep again. Time for watch duty changes every day which means that their sleep cycle is interrupted everyday while their wake-up time is always 6 a.m. This doesn't sound pleasant. does it?

When I was on my first watch duty with a senior soldier, I was very alert and vigilant while the senior soldier seemed very relaxed. I didn't know why but after a couple of months, I understood why. The first day, nothing happened. The second day, nothing happened. The third day... nothing happened and fourth day... nothing. South Korea and North Korea have been in a cease fire for 70 years and the military base of my battalion is located 40 miles away from the demilitarized zone. So there was an extremely low probability that North Koreans soldiers would attempt to infiltrate my army base. Of course, no Koreans are interested in breaking into the army base. Who would want to secretly get into a military building that is filled with hundreds of soldiers? Senior soldiers knew that no one dared to try to cross the military fence. So senior soldiers often fell asleep while they were on the watch duty. When nothing really happens for a long period of time, this is what happens to most soldiers. They stop being vigilant and become drowsy and sleep.

A parable of ten bridesmaids

In the parable of ten bridesmaids, we have read a similar story. Weddings in the ancient world were different than what we experience today. After all the wedding arrangements and agreements between two families were made, the actual wedding celebration would start. For the Jews, the day starts at sundown so the man goes to his bride's home in the evening to start their new life together as the new day begins. A wedding ceremony started with a parade to the bridegroom's home. In today's scripture, ten bridesmaids got news that the wedding was going to happen so they prepared lamps and came out for the celebration. But, just like many weddings, things didn't go as planned. As the bridegroom was delayed, eventually the excitement faded, and both the wise and the foolish, fell asleep.

The parable asks us to imagine ourselves as those who wait for the groom's return. It challenges us to think about our waiting for Christ's return. "Do you believe Christ could return at any moment?" I guess that most of you would say, "Of course!" Saying "no" to this question would seem close to heresy. But Jesus hasn't come back for two millennia, not two hundred

years, but two thousand! And it's a long time to wait expectantly. Right? So what has happened? We have stopped waiting. Or we wait but we don't wait vigilantly for Christ's return.

Moreover, we tend to think of the second coming of Christ as the day of judgment. When you think of Christ's coming, what images first come to mind? Heaven will split open, some people will go up and the last of them will suffer from eternal judgement. Fire, chaos, wars, plagues, disasters, and death. It's not a bright picture. So, we tend to fear it rather than celebrate it.

The typical interpretations of today's parable focus on judgement and punishment. We should be ready, otherwise, we will be tossed into the darkness and suffer eternally. If you have ever thought of the second coming of Christ in this way, you have missed the important point.

In the parable, Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is like waiting for a wedding. First of all, Christ's return is like a wedding, the joyful celebration! When the groom comes, the wedding feast may begin! Something special happens during the wedding. A celebration of new life together, new possibility, a covenant between two human beings and of course, a great party! There's a lot of things to celebrate at a wedding.

In the bible, weddings often symbolize the relationship between God and Israel. The Prophet Isaiah says, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (Isaiah 61:10-11).

Isaiah says God restores the broken relationship between God and His people, and replaces human unfaithfulness with righteousness. He describes this redemptive moment as a wedding. The wedding in the bible symbolizes the joyful moment of salvation and new creation. This is the wedding the bridesmaids await. This is Christ's return we are waiting for.

Our world is broken and we see and experience injustice and innocent suffering. Black mothers fear for the safety of their sons everyday so they have to teach their children how to act in public and interact with law enforcers. Due to the uncontrollable greed of big pharmaceutical companies, prescription drug costs in Americans are sky-high and many people face hard decisions between feeding their family and taking life sustaining medications. Hatred comes to dominate American politics and the lives of people. It seems that we have forgotten how to love one another. We struggle to keep our faith alive in the age of atheism. The darkness is so deep and we don't know what to do.

But when Christ returns, there will be a celebration of new life, redemption, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and peace. God's justice and mercy prevails and God will restore loving relationship between God and us and among us. So, do not fear Christ's return but expect and wait vigilantly for his return. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

One theologian says, "To act as wise bridesmaids is to affirm our faith in the coming Christ. Doing so shows our trust that God is a God of justice and mercy."¹ It means that we live by a vision of the kingdom of heaven, even if there is no tangible evidence of change.

How many of you voted in this election? Good. Do you know when American women first acquired the right to vote? Women's suffrage was ratified on August 18, 1920. Do you

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3459

know how long women had to fight for their right to vote? Almost a century. Their century-long protest bore fruit in 1920. Think of the first women who fought for women's suffrage. They were able to continue their activism for it because they not only dreamt that women should have a right to vote, but they also lived by that vision. Without the expectation and faith in what's coming, we may not be able to enjoy the privilege of voting for our leaders. Waiting for Christ's return give us hope even in the midst of darkness and help us follow the vision of God's kingdom. So keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

There is a spiritual song, "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning." This spiritual is based on today's scripture. Like most spirituals, it's origin can be traced back to the slave experience where it was used as a work song and a way of hoping for something better. This song was a flame around which African American community gathered to keep their spirits warm in a dark and scary world of pain and suffering.² The lyric of the song is simple. "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning / keep your lamps trimmed and burning / keep your lamps trimmed and burning / See what the Lord has done."

Instead of focusing on the reality of pain and suffering, this spiritual keeps our minds on our task and yet looks beyond to another reality, another kingdom that is coming. It invites us to pay attention to what God is doing among us every moment of the day.

Another version of this song by Rev. Gary Davis ends like this. "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. / "for the world's about to end." It reminds us that what we see and what we experience is not all there is. There is more, something more to come, another world, the kingdom of heaven! The destination of our history does not end with despair because God holds our future and our final destination is the kingdom of heaven.

The scars of racism, sexism or ageism you bear and the suffering you endure do not define you; the chains we wear in life, the brokenness and failures we bear do not determine our lives. Injustice, poverty, oppression, hunger, global warming, wealth inequality... all the predicaments we face are not the final destination of our history.

One day, one blessed day, when the groom comes..., when our Christ return, the tear would end and new life, an abundant life, would begin. So my friends, keep your lamps trimmed and burning and wait for Christ.

I know that some of you may be disappointed with the result of the election. Some of you may be satisfied with the result. But remember, President Trump is not the Christ we wait for. Joe Biden is not the Christ we are waiting for. We are waiting for Jesus Christ, our savior. So, don't be so disappointed or overly excited but expect our Christ's return and live for the coming kingdom of heaven.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. See what the Lord has done. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. For God will wipe away every tear from your eyes. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. For God will ignite the sacred flame in the heart of all people who await Christ's coming and help us walk together to make this world the kingdom of God. So my friends, keep you lamps trimmed and burning! Amen.

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/there-is-now/twenty-third-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/twenty-third-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-preaching-notes>