

BRIDESMAIDS (NOT THE MOVIE)

1st Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, New York
November 9, 2014
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13



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If you're a bear, you get to hibernate. You do nothing but sleep for six months. I could deal with that.

Before you hibernate, you're supposed to eat yourself stupid. I could deal with that, too.

If you're a mama bear, everyone knows you mean business. You swat anyone who bothers your cubs. If your cubs get out of line, you swat them, too. I could deal with that.

If you're a bear, your mate EXPECTS you to wake up growling. She EXPECTS that you will have hairy legs and excess body fat.

Some days you just want to be a bear, don't you? The bear gets to take one incredible power nap.



I've long admired those who knew how to do this easily. Fifteen quick minutes in the late afternoon battles back the post-lunch weariness

whether you are a busy executive, a stay-at-home parent or a student facing a term-paper deadline. It's no siesta, but it's enough to restore vitality for the final push of the day.

But bears know more about effective snoozing. Recent research is beginning to unpack the amazing slumber skills of black bears. They hibernate for up to four months during the winter, without ever waking up to eat, drink, and relieve themselves or exercise. And while the catatonic inactivity of hibernating bears may drop their heart rate to as low as six beats per minute, they still burn an amazing 4,000 calories per day!

What is truly amazing about these power-nappers is the ability to emerge from hibernation faster and stronger than a combat Humvee on a cold day — at *almost the same level of physical strength and stamina* as when they started their season-skipping siesta. Through daily regimens of muscle stimulation and contraction, bears are able to both maintain their constant body temperature and keep their massive muscles in working shape.

But, a human being who becomes sick and bedridden for two weeks, let alone 2 months will find that muscles will have become listless from passivity. We could hardly take a Peyton Manning or a Tom Brady and ask them to execute with the same precision and ability at training camp in July like they did in the playoffs in January. No way.

But hibernating bears? Their spell of complete inactivity is offset by the amazing ability to

efficiently maintain their strength. So come spring, they bound out of their den at full speed ready to eat about anything in sight. Four months off and good as new. Now that is a true power nap.

Researchers are hoping to learn the science behind the regenerating-while-napping black bear. Discovery would apply findings to the bedridden or to those with degenerative neuromuscular diseases. But while the deep sleep of hibernation is great for bears and may one day impact medical therapy, not all slumber is equally beneficial.

Fall asleep on Jesus, and you may not emerge feeling so rested and refreshed.

When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he used parables with illustrations from everyday life to make his point. In Matthew 25, he tells the story of 10 single bridesmaids who go out to meet a prospective bridegroom. But the groom is running late, and so they all nod off for a while ... a power nap before the courting begins.

Eventually the Bachelor arrived, but not every Bachelorette got a rose that night. While all were eager for the opportunity to meet a potential quality mate, only five were eligible and invited to the party.

Now we know that Jesus was able to nap, even while frothy seas stormed around him (Luke 8:23). And *the issue in this story is not the fact that the bridesmaids napped* as well, because all 10 did so. The issue is *that only five woke up prepared and ready to go* in the middle of the night. Jesus is warning against bad kingdom catnaps; hibernating without remaining strong and ready to go.

So what are the lessons for the drowsy today?

It seems strange that those who arranged the lectionary would put this gospel passage here. It would have made more sense to have it emerge early in Advent when a primary theme is waiting, don't you think? Jesus seems to suggest

that even though the coming of the bridegroom was delayed, it was still an eventual reality (25:5-6). Christians living 2,000 years after the God's initial incarnate arrival might easily forget that a second coming could happen on a day or hour when we are not expecting. (25:13). Winter *will* change to spring, and then there will be no more time for sleeping.

Unfortunately, our day goes by and we assume Jesus has not come. Well, yeah. There have been no apocalyptic fireworks, no trumpets sounding, no clouds parting. No Parousia. No pileups on the freeways. No airplanes tumbling out of the skies. None of that.

But here's the deal: Jesus came today, and it's possible we were so asleep that we didn't notice, and if we were awake, our lamps were so dim that we couldn't see him. Jesus was here today. Jesus was here yesterday. And Jesus is going to be here tomorrow. So where will we find Jesus?

If we're awake and alert, if our lamps are trimmed to shed some light, we'll see Jesus in the prisons, along the highways, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, at the food bank, in the soup kitchen, at the office, in the hospital, and next door. But if we're lazy, sleepy, and if we've lost muscle tone — there's a good chance that we won't see Jesus.

So Jesus warned against not being ready when he comes.

Five of the virgins were un-bear like. They emerged from their hibernation and they weren't prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. They had to run off to the market to buy oil in order to prepare their lamps to meet him. Like most of Jesus' parables, the stories are a bit open ended with multiple meanings. This one is designed to have us asking, "So how prepared are we for the coming of God's anointed?" Can we awake during this delay prepared to meet him, or must we still scramble to become pretty and party-worthy?

It is better to keep the lamps trimmed. Putting

our spiritual lives in order is not something to be put off till a later day. The day to be ready for the bridegroom is today and not tomorrow. So what is the oil of which we are short?

Oil in Scripture is often a symbol for the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we try to spring into action without submitting our work, our intentions or our purpose to the Holy Spirit so that God's Spirit can fill our deeds with power and effectiveness.

Or perhaps we're short of the oil of kindness and compassion. There's no way we're ready to meet Jesus in the person of the unloved and unfortunate lacking the essential oils of compassion and mercy.

Maybe we're short of the oil of patience and long-suffering. Without such oil, we're ill-equipped to deal with Jesus who comes to us in the form of a person who needs long-term love, extensive patience and guidance.

Perhaps we're short of the oil of education and instruction. We're not adequately trained to be of service where we have all the natural skills and the interest to minister. Could it be that God is calling us to take our expertise and skills to another level in order to more adequately meet Jesus when he comes.

To be prepared for the party, we're to keep our wicks of our lamps trimmed and the lamps filled with oil. In hindsight, all 10 virgins could have had oil ready on that evening. No doubt the five who didn't would lament about just how unsatisfying the unprepared life can really be.

If anything, I don't much care for the somber ending to the parable. The opportunity to be included as a member of God's kingdom eventually comes to an end. But aren't we used to plenty of second chances? Kids cry out "do-overs" if they don't like the outcome of a game played with friends. High-school students can retake the SAT to improve their scores. The delete key on our computers quickly offers the chance to "fix mistake" that an old typewriter

never could. In fact, the love and grace of God offers plenty of second chances ... even seven times 70 chances if necessary.

But Jesus seems to suggest in this story that there is an eventual end point at which these second chances are no more. Lazarus knew it. One of the thieves on the cross knew it. And Jesus obviously knew it as well (25:11-12). When the bridegroom does return, the opportunities to prepare for him are no longer presented.

Jesus sounds a loving warning: "Live a spiritual life that is *already* prepared for my return." Well, then, what do we do with this story told by Jesus?

We might take a spiritual inventory of our lives. What areas can we see that would be like the untrimmed lamp? What oil do we need to go and purchase now? In our devotional lives ... in our workplace ... in our friendships with others ... in the way we treat our families ... in the choices we make when nobody else is looking?

And aren't there interesting implications for our loved ones? The point of the story is not the relationship between the five prepared and the five unprepared ladies. However, is it not also true that the most loving thing the former could have done for the latter would have been to bring enough oil to share with them?

As those who are prepared, we know that the "Groom" is coming and that the "Groom" is already here and will present himself on any number of occasions every day of our lives. What more loving thing can we do for others than to help them be prepared, calling them from their sleep and helping them find oil to trim their lamps? The "Groom" wants *as many guests as possible* to enter his party, and we can lovingly help prepare others for the feast.

Might it be helpful to consider that the story Jesus told is after all a wedding banquet. It is a party, not something woeful. And this view should speak to our motivation in the spiritual life. The busy week is over and we are getting ready to go to a party at a friend's house. That is

a good thing, full of anticipation. There is no motivation of panic or obligation. We look forward to the community of friends and anticipate festivity. Jesus didn't tell the parable of 10 virgins preparing for an IRS tax audit. It was a party.

And the party Jesus to which Jesus calls us is one for which there is worth in getting ready . . . it will be a banquet of unending satisfaction.

Take a lesson from the black bear:

Wake up prepared to go.
The party is worth the anticipation.
The suitor is worth the preparation.
And the life of unprepared lamps only offers one regrets.

In the little book, *Laughter in Appalachia*, Fred Park of Berea, Kentucky tells a story Quill. Quill lived way back in the woods where he hunted and fished all the time. Quill didn't pay any attention to the hunting seasons or laws or anything, and he knew the woods better than the game warden.

The game warden had been trying to catch Quill for a long time. Today was the day. He knew Quill would be up early to go fishing even though it wasn't officially trout season. So the game warden sneaked down to Quill's cabin in the middle of the night and hid on top of Quill's house. This way he knew he had the jump on Quill. He'd let him head out and then he'd follow him. His plan was to hide in the woods until Quill had caught a large, illegal bunch of fish, and he would catch Quill.

As it started to get a little bit of daylight, the game warden could hear Quill get up, start a fire, and put the coffee on. His stomach started growling at the smell of that coffee and those fresh smelling biscuits as they baked in the oven. He could hardly contain himself. Suddenly out walked Quill on the porch and hollered, "Come on down here and git some of this coffee and biscuits while they're hot! I know you're out there!" He went back in and shut the door.

The game warden could not believe it. He climbed down and walked up on the porch and into the house and exclaimed, "Well, how did you know I was out there?"

Quill said, "I didn't. I walk out there and say that ever morning, just in case ye are!"¹ Quill may not have been a genius, but he knew enough to take precautions. He was ready!

Quill would probably have appreciated Jesus' story about the wise and foolish virgins.

The admonition is clear: be prepared! Preparation is often the determining factor in effectiveness. . Successful people know this is true. Yes, there are a few lucky times, but the odds are good that victory goes to the prepared.

Liu Chi Kung, placed second to Van Cliburn in the 1958 Tchaikovsky competition and was imprisoned a year later during the Cultural Revolution in China. During the entire seven years he was held, he was denied the use of a piano. Soon after his release, however, he was back on tour. Critics wrote in astonishment that his musicianship was better than ever.

"How did you do this?" a critic asked. "You had no chance to practice for seven years."

"I did practice," Liu replied, "every day. I rehearsed every piece I had ever played, note by note, in my mind."² Liu knew that he must stay ready. He would not always be in prison. He wanted to be prepared in case there ever was another performance.

In 1976, Indiana University's basketball team was undefeated throughout the regular season and captured the NCAA National Championship. Controversial and colorful coach Bobby Knight led them to that championship. Shortly

¹ Loyal Jones and Billy Edd Wheeler, *Laughter in Appalachia*, (New York: Ivy Books, 1987).

² John R. Noe, *Peak Performance Principles For High Achievers*, (New York: Berkley Books, 1984).

afterwards, Coach Knight was interviewed on the television show "60 Minutes." The commentator asked him, "Why is it, Bobby, that your basketball teams at Indiana do so well? Is it the will to succeed?" In my mind, I thought, "No it is probably because the players are afraid that Coach Knight would throw a chair at them.

But, what he did say was, "The will to succeed is important, but more importantly it is the will to prepare with practice, practice, practice."³

Indeed, our attitude about preparation reveals a lot about our character.

Charlie Brown of the Peanuts comic strip once said that his life was mixed up because he missed all of the rehearsals.

Of course some people confuse constant rehearsal with the real thing. Henry Nelson Wieman wrote about his college roommate in college. He had to have everything in readiness. He procured a large, comfortable chair. He got study slippers and a lounging jacket. He fastened a bookrest to the arm of the chair to hold the book at the right angle before his eyes. He installed a special lamp and eyeshade, pencils, paper and revolving bookcase. He would come into the room after the evening meal, take off his coat and put on the jacket, take off his shoes and slip into the slippers, adjust the study lamp, put his book on the bookrest, recline in the comfortable chair with his eyeshade over his eyes, and when everything was perfectly adjusted, he would go to sleep.⁴

Preparation didn't do him much good. Our attitude about preparation reveals a great deal about our character.

Graham Greene once observed. "There is always one moment when the door opens and lets in the future." And it is at that moment that we sometimes encounter change and many of these

we will welcome. A bride and groom, for example, stand nervously at the altar, whispering to one another the words that now unite them as husband and wife. Granted, they may not fully appreciate the fact, but their lives -- from this very moment on -- will change.

On the way down to the maternity ward, you stop off at the store to purchase an infant car seat and an extra supply of diapers. The baby's room is freshly painted, and much of the morning has been devoted to) task of assembling the crib. With all of the excitement, it may not have had time to dawn on you. However, take it from someone with prior experience in such matters: your entire life is about to change! And from that moment there will be diapers and lots of change.

I have sometimes thought that in the church nursery we should put up a biblical text - 1 Corinthians 15:51 - *We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.*

They throw a small party for you over at the office. Someone stands up with a smile on his face, joking that now that you're retired you'll finally have a chance to do a little traveling, or maybe even straighten out those awful slices in your golf swing. They go around the room congratulating you, best wishes mingle with goodbyes and the tears are tempered by promises to keep in touch. But at the end of the day, as you shuffle a few personal belongings into a cardboard box, you begin to realize that your life is going to change. Usually, though, it is a welcomed change. I mean, you've planned and prepared for it. And so, when the anticipated event at last arrives, it's frequently a change well received.

Of course, you know as well as I do, that not all of life's changes are like that. Sometimes change is confusing and chaotic. Sometimes change is disturbing and disruptive. And often, change can be extremely frightening.

I stood, not long ago, on beneath a weatherworn canopy, surrounded by flowers and I watched her -- now for the first time a widow -- slowly move to the casket, pinching off the stem of a single

³ John R. Noe, *Peak Performance Principles For High Achievers*, (New York: Berkley Books, 1984).

⁴ *Treasury of Christian Faith*, Stuber and Clark, p. 659.

rose and clutching it tenderly to heart. Before we left that hallowed ground she said, "I don't think my world will ever be the same again. He was my very best friend."

Life entails change. Sometimes it is welcomed, other times it is not. But in every instance, it serves as a silent testimony that even that to which we fervently cling can never remain constant for very long.

You have that sense in the Old Testament. Stepping through centuries in short, creed-like stanzas, Joshua began to recite the extensive litany of names and events -- recalling everyone from Abraham to the Amorites, from Jacob to Jericho. Here at Shechem Joshua seemed to want them to recognize the inevitability of change and choice.

Like it or not, change necessitates choice, and choice necessitates decision. From Joshua's perspective, the trial is over and the jury can no longer afford to be out. Ample evidence of the Almighty's presence has been provided, their own history has proven a credible witness, the concluding arguments have all been delivered, and the time has come for the people to submit a verdict. "Now therefore revere the Lord," he declares, "and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness ... if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods that your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:14-15).

In other words: "Here are the alternatives," says Joshua, "now make up your minds. Those who intend to serve the Lord step forward. The rest of you -- good luck!"

At least on the surface, the matter appears to be rather clear-cut. I mean, it's not as if the prophet is asking these people to write an essay or fill in the blanks. This is more or less a multiple choice exam: a) the gods of your ancestors; b) the gods of the Amorites; c) Yahweh, the Lord God of

Israel. Take a pencil and circle one of the above. Sounds simple enough, right?

Well, not so fast. Keep in mind that the Israelites are dwelling in a society which has a veritable smorgasbord of deities. You name it; they have it. Simply pick up a menu and order a little heavenly intervention a la carte. Problem with your crops? Try the third idol to the left: bow three times, leave a contribution, and you'll be harvesting within a couple of months. Over there, the one with the long line and the dancing girls gyrating on the stage out front: pay a visit to the sacred prostitutes, and your cattle will be blessed with a bountiful offspring. There are plenty of gods to go around, or so the surrounding culture suggests, so why take chances? Life entails change. There's no telling what the future will bring. And hence, it might be a good idea to have a few different gods around just in case. I mean, we don't want to burn any bridges, right? Leaving one's options open could prove favorable somewhere down the road.

It seems an enticing argument, I'll admit. But for Joshua, it's beside the point. In a word, being favorable is irrelevant. It's not a question of choosing what is helpful; it's a question of choosing what is true. And choices are crucial when into the scene, Jesus, the bridegroom steps.

Choosing to embrace the opportunity God gives and the opportunity to be ready is a choice and God has more patience than we to wait. We prepare and keep our lamps ready as we choose to love or to hate, to give or to hoard, to become involved or to withdraw. Choosing to reach out and mend a torn marriage, or to let it continue to unravel at the seams. Choosing to apologize for hurtful words we now regret and wish we could recant, or to add another brick to the wall of silence that exists between us and our neighbor. Choosing to devote one's life to something that will mean a difference in this world, or to settle into the seclusion of your own -- satisfied with a good credit rating and a secure retirement. The decision is ours.

Cheryl tells it this way, "When I was a child, my dad and I were as close as we could be. And the times I knew it best would be at those family reunions, when after the big meal, they'd move all the furniture, crank up the stereo, and start playing polka records -- one after another. Eventually, someone would put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' It was our special song. And my father would come over with outstretched hand and say, 'Come on, girl, let's roll them blues away!' And we'd dance -- my father and me -- we'd dance."

"As a teenager, however, I started to despise the silliness of those family get-togethers. I remember one occasion in particular when, for reasons known only to adolescents, I sat moping on the sofa in one of those don't-associate-with-anybody moods. As the 'Beer Barrel Polka' began to play, my father came over with outstretched hand. But I glared at him with icy indifference. 'Just leave me alone,' I muttered under my breath. Startled, he turned, and never invaded my privacy again. He danced with my mother, he danced with my sisters, but not with me.

"I'd come home from a date, and he'd be waiting for me in the old chair -- his bathrobe loosely tied at the waist, an opened book in his lap, half asleep. 'what are you doing up?' I'd say. 'Why don't you just go to bed?' He'd look at me with sad, pleading eyes and whisper, 'I was just waiting for you, that's all. I was just waiting for you.'

"I was glad to leave that house when I finally graduated high school. My father and I had a distant, formal relationship, but not much more. Eventually, though, I began to miss what we had once enjoyed -- only I wasn't quite sure how to bridge the gap. Until one day, when I happened to be home for a family reunion, somebody put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' As my father walked across the room, I went up to him with outstretched hand and said, 'Daddy, I believe this is our dance.' He looked at me and smiled, 'I've

been waiting for you. I've been waiting for you.'
"5

Make no mistake: this is the crucial issue for Joshua and it was the crucial issue for Jesus. May our lamps be ready when he comes!

⁵ Thomas G. Long, "Joy In The House," Princeton Seminary Chapel, Princeton, New Jersey, July 5, 1987.