

November 12, 2017: Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 25:1-13: More Than a Moment

90	365	Mar. 25, 970	Jan. 1, 1000
1033	1284	1496	1533
1666	1689	1736	1792
Dec. 25, 1825	Mar. 21, 1843	Oct. 22, 1844	Aug. 7, 1847
1874	1925	1936	1948
Apr. 1957	1967	1981	1982
June 8-9, 1985	Oct. 11, 1988	Sept. 28, 1992	Spring of 1997
Mar. 31, 1998	Feb. 12, 2006	Mar. 21, 2008	Nov. 4, 2008
May 21, 2011	2012	May 18, 2013	Sept. 28, 2015

Thirty-six different years and dates. Can anyone tell me what they all have in have in common? I hope I haven't done this little exercise here before. The second time it loses its effectiveness. Every single one represents a prediction, someone made in regard to the return of Jesus and the establishment of his Kingdom. All in spite of verses like this one, from...

Matthew 24:36

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.

Or this one...

Acts 1:6-7

So when had come together they asked him, "Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

And the last verse we read in our text for this morning...

Matthew 25:13

Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Rather than criticize all these people for claiming to know what Jesus himself did not, or for being wrong, which they all were, sometimes more than once, I want us to consider something else this morning, and that is why. Why these people felt compelled to figure out when Jesus was coming back. I think for most of them, it was for the simple reason that it's easier to prepare for a moment than for a lifetime.

The story Jesus told of the ten bridesmaids might be a little confusing for us at first, because it reflects wedding traditions very different than our own. It was customary in those days for the wedding ceremony to be held at the home of the groom's parents. On the day of the ceremony the groom would be escorted to the home by a group of waiting bridesmaids.

That's what is going on here. These ten bridesmaids went to the appointed place at the appointed time to wait for the groom. Apparently it was at night, so each bridesmaid brought an oil lamp with them, but five of the bridesmaids, anticipating that the groom might be late, brought along extra oil as well.

As it turns out he was, so late in fact that they all became drowsy and fell asleep. Then at midnight they were all awoken with a shout signifying his arrival. They trimmed their wicks, and prepared to go out to meet him, but then the five who did not bring any extra oil quickly realized they did not have enough to last until they reached their destination. They asked the other five for some of theirs...but they did not have enough to share...so they went to buy some more.

While they were away, the groom arrived, the five with extra oil met him and escorted him to his parents' home, went inside, and the door was shut behind them. The five who had gone to get more oil finally arrived at the home of the groom's parents. They could hear the noises inside the home that told them the celebration was well underway. They knocked loudly, calling out, begging to be let in...but it was too late.

This is another example of Jesus using a wedding feast as a metaphor for the great messianic banquet that would signify the end of the age and the arrival of God's kingdom on earth. His point to his disciples was clear. If they wanted to be at this party, they had to be prepared, they had to be ready, when he returned for them. And because they didn't know when he was coming, they couldn't just get ready for a moment in time, they had to stay ready for a lifetime.

Through this parable Jesus also gave them a picture of what being ready looked like. The five wise bridesmaids were ready for the groom because they brought along extra oil. In some places in the Scriptures, and in other Jewish writings, oil referred to good works. So you could make the case that doing the right things, living according to Jesus' teachings, has something to do with being ready. But good works, by themselves, can't save, only God's grace will save us. There had to be something more that Jesus wanted to communicate.

More than the idea of good works, the extra oil the bridesmaids brought along represented a commitment to following Jesus and living in relationship with him. The extra oil said they were in this thing for the long haul. Whenever the bridegroom returned, no longer how long he took, they would be ready. The five foolish bridesmaids, on the other hand, only planned to wait for as long as their oil would last them. They were only in it for the short term. Beyond that, well, that had yet to be decided.

The Christians who made up Matthew's audience believed that Jesus' return was just around the corner. So they made themselves ready for that. They got all their ducks in a row. They confessed all their sins. They made following Jesus a priority. And they waited. And they waited. And they waited some more. And Jesus didn't come back. One by one, they began to give up, returning to their old way of living, and losing that state of readiness. This parable was intended to call them back to a state of readiness, and encourage them to make more than a momentary decision, but a life-time commitment.

You and I face the very same temptation. It's easy to decide to follow Jesus for a season, to get caught up in the emotion.

Maybe we were inspired (or frightened) by an end-time prediction. Somebody demonstrated in a very convincing way how several world events were perfectly aligned with the Scriptures. We bought the book. We subscribed to their blog. We started living like Jesus was coming back tomorrow. Like every other person in the history of the world who thought they had figured it all out, they were wrong. The date for their prediction passed, and that was that. Suddenly our commitment to Christ loses that sense of urgency.

Maybe we were motivated by a terrible tragedy. In the weeks following 9-11, church attendance skyrocketed. Suddenly the promise of tomorrow seemed less certain. The same thing often happens when we experience personal tragedy. We learn we have a terrible disease, or some other life-threatening condition. Or something like that happens to someone we know. All of a sudden God becomes very important to us. Then the world seems safe again, or we get better. God no longer matters.

Maybe we made a New Year's resolution. We were going to do things different this year. We were going to go to church more often. We were going to contribute more financially. We were going to serve in a ministry. But life happened. We got busy. By the time February rolled around, Jesus had once again faded into the background.

These are just a few examples. There are all kinds of reasons that might compel us to follow Jesus for one moment in time, but what he wants from us, and what we need to give to him, is not one moment in time but every moment in time. I know that can sound overwhelming. A life-time is such a huge commitment. And commitment is scary. Especially where there are so many unknowns. When we decide to follow Jesus we really have no idea where he will lead us. But we can know, through the eyes of faith, that when we find ourselves at the party he is going to throw when he returns, it will all be worth it.

It helps me to make sense of what Jesus is saying by comparing it to a marriage commitment. I know that sometimes things happen between a husband and wife that can make remaining in that relationship extremely difficult, if not impossible, and very unhealthy. But something else I have come to realize is that if both partners approach a marriage with the right mindset it can be a huge deciding factor in whether their marriage is a success or failure.

What I mean by that is, if a couple approaches their marriage as the life-long commitment that God intended, it will make a difference. When they have an argument, or disagreement, they will either do what it takes to resolve it, or they will learn to live with it. Those are their only two options. And when life takes a turn they never anticipated, their spouse gets sick, or some other tragedy strikes, they don't just abandon ship. They made a promise. And with God's help, they are going to keep it.

You have to approach your relationship with God with the same mindset, because things will not always be easy. Are you going to continue as long as things are going well, or you are happy, but then when things start getting difficult you will move on to something else? Or are you in it for the long haul? Are you prepared to say, each and every day, this is my God? This is who I will serve. This is who I will follow.

For a marriage to work, both partners have to approach it with the right mindset. The same is true with our relationship to God. But we never have to wonder where he stands. He is committed to seeing this

thing to completion. When he said “I will never leave you or forsake you,” he meant it. He will always prove faithful, even when we are faithless. He is in it for the long haul. But what about you?

No marriage ends overnight. It’s the result of many heated conversations, and possibly hurtful behaviors. The same is true of our relationship with God. As long as you have even the slightest bit of concern about where things stand between you and God, you can renew that commitment, reignite that spark, and be counted among those who are ready when Jesus returns for his bride, the Church. And if you’ve never taken that step, you can today. You can walk down the aisle and be married to Christ.