

SLD11.13.11 32nd Ordinary All Saints
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 25: 1-13
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Something About Us, Something About God”

Remember film? I mean camera film? And the cameras that used it?

Remember running out of film right when you wanted to take a picture?

How about batteries? Ever come up short of replacement batteries?

My friend and colleague, Emilio Talamonte, and his wife, Denise, were visiting from Brasil this last week. They came over for a visit and to bring me up to date on their global vision for a seedling of a self-sustaining wholistic community in Morretes, Brasil name of “Hebron Valley.” Emilio’s all on fire about it. Has been for about 20 years.

So he pulls out his digital camera to show off the school and chalets and restaurant they’ve built, and...the screen goes blank. You gotta carry spare batteries.

If you’re a mom or a teacher, you’d better carry a stash of Kleenex and bandaids and hand sanitizer, too. If you’re a boy scout, or Karen Mason, in order to handle *anything* life might throw at you, you’ll want to add duct tape, scissors, string, a screwdriver, a penknife, a tape measure, some bottled water, a waterproof tarp, a flashlight and a flare.

This is just what thoughtful, foresightful, ready-for-anything people do. They’re prepared.

The only thing worse for thoughtful, foresightful, ready-for-anything people than being unprepared is...if nothing happens. All that preparation for nothing!

Waiting around for something to happen is such a bore.

This went I went to my doctor's for a check up. Middle of the week. Not a soul in the waiting room. Four employees standing around in the office comparing fingernails. Still I waited 45 minutes before anybody came to get me. Then another 20 minutes in the exam room, and still no doctor.

I tried not to get pissy. Delays happen – who knows that better than I?

But time goes by and you begin to wonder: Have they forgotten me? Are they just being profligate with my time? Do they just not care?

Only, for the bridesmaids in today's text, it's even worse. I can't say I was looking all that forward to seeing my doctor. But you know these ten virginal girls are pumped about meeting the bridegroom! Weddings are special events in every century, and no way these girls didn't primp and coiffe and get all cute for the day. Must have been a pretty sight, ten young women decked out in their finest, giggling, whispering, telling spicy jokes, faces alit with anticipation and the flickering flames of their oil lamps after it got dark.

[For *all* of them are wise enough to bring lamps; Even the foolish girls in this story aren't all *that* foolish.]

Only the bridegroom doesn't show!

And after awhile, well, if you ever had to wait in line for your high school senior picture, or your passport photo, or your shot with the ship's captain, you know that over time hairspray weakens, drapes crumple, and lipstick gets on your teeth, and, well, "peak cuteness" can be maintained for only so long.

Still, the girls wait. And wait. And wait. And somewhere between fallen bangs and pinching Wonder Bras, off they drift to sleep. Until, right about midnight, someone

startles them awake with a holler that the bridegroom has just arrived, and they all stumble clumsily to their feet.

“Hey, where are my shoes? Get off my petticoat! Anybody seen my shawl? My lamp’s going out. Lemme borrow some of *your* oil, sister.” “No way. Go get your own.”

The kingdom of heaven will be like this, says Jesus. A bunch of drowsy, frowsy, cranky bridezillas, waking up in a bad mood. And looking out only for themselves.

And the *wise* ones, according to scripture, are the ones who think to bring extra oil. (Only, what if the bridegroom had delayed a week? Or a month? Or 2011 years? Even the wise girls in this story aren’t all *that* wise.)

Still, clearly the story is meant to jar all Jesus’ listeners awake to his eventual re-arrival, even if nobody gets to know when that’s going to be.

“But Rabbi,” kvetches one of the ousted citizens of Anatevka in Fiddler On The Roof, “we’ve been waiting for the Messiah all our lives! Wouldn’t this be a good time for him to come?” “Well,” responds the rabbi quietly, “we’ll just have to wait for him... someplace else.”

Waiting around for something to happen has always been such a bore, and Jesus knows it. He know his disciples are going to get tired of it. Get distracted. Fall asleep. Just like they did at Gesthemene. In fact, after he’s dead, they’re likely to get so distracted they may not even recognize him when he *does* show up. Clearly the parable of the bridesmaids is meant to, as one author puts it, “quicken us all with the utmost care and diligence to get ready for Christ’s second coming.” To...be prepared!

When I hear the words “be prepared!” I can’t help thinking either of a boy scout (or Karen) or of Scar’s song to the hyenas in the Lion King.

See if the lyrics don't apply to at least some of the bridesmaids:

It is clear from your vacant expressions
The lights are not all on upstairs
But we're talking kings and successions
Even you can't be caught unawares

So prepare for a chance of a lifetime
Be prepared for sensational news
A shining new era
Is tiptoeing nearer

And where do we feature?
Just listen to teacher¹

Be prepared!

Today's parable is an admonishment for we who follow Jesus to remain vigilant, alert, prepared, for the Coming One. Got it, right?

But how are we to maintain such heightened anticipation over time?

We don't. We get weary, distracted, fall asleep. We just do. It's one of the reasons we come to worship – to glorify God, to be sure – but, also to pat ourselves awake, to rouse our crumpled selves and pull our heart together to receive the news that the Beloved One has arrived, that's he's here, that he's welcoming us to his table.

The demands of the world, life, relationships, personal madness, pull on everyone of us. We get distracted. We fall asleep to the good news of God's coming. We forget to look for it. We forget what it looks like. So, individually and as a community, we engage in a number of actions and disciplines to keep ourselves alert: prayer, worship, service, hope, forgiveness, patience, healing. All pat us back awake. All nurture our faith. All help prepare us for the Coming One. All feed our belief in his Presence.

¹ <http://www.lionking.org/lyrics/OBCR/BePrepared.html>

We Christians can't do without that perennial wake-up pat, you know. And there are few places besides community to grow in belief. That's really what a community of faith is for – for its members to grow in belief and support each other in living out of it.

Recall that old quote from Marshall McLuhan: "If I hadn't believed it, I would never have seen it."² Don't we all notice most what we're primed to look for? "Finding" may take a whole longer than any of us imagined, if we don't believe in the first place, we will never see.

It's hard to stay awake. We cannot do it by ourselves. At least I cannot do it by myself. We need each other to help one another stay awake.

Although cooperation and mutual support is not exactly the hallmark of this particular parable. In fact, towards the end, it takes a bit of an anxiety provoking twist, at least for someone like me who is often late. Those poor, forgetful, giddy bridesmaids who show up late can apparently, as far as the bridegroom is concerned, pretty much rot in hell. He isn't opening the door, he isn't forgiving them, he isn't even acknowledging their existence. "Truly I tell you," he declares to them, "I do not know you."

And what are we to make of this truculent, inflexible, unforgiving Jesus?

It may help to recall that at this juncture in Matthew's gospel, Jesus knows he's about to die, knows how perpetually clueless his disciples are, knows time is running out to get them on board. So he tells some uncomfortable stories to scare them into paying attention. And Paul's church has been doing it ever since, right?: "Do right or you'll get thrown in the lak-a-fer," as primitive artists R.A. Miller and Howard Finster

²http://www.searchquotes.com/quotation/I_wouldn%27t_have_seen_it_if_I_hadn%27t_believed_it./133235/

referred to it; the “lake of fire,” into which all us unrepentant sinners get tossed for showing up late.

Fortunately that sort of approach doesn't prevail much anymore, at least in the Presbyterian Church. Inclined as we are to leave the flames of hell and its lak-a-fer to more anxious theologies, our concern is more to keep mindful of the *grace* of God. The way we understand it, two cruets, ten cruets, twenty, however many cruets of oil we haul to the table, it'll never be enough. Nor does it have to be. Because, notwithstanding how *this* story ends, *I'm* telling you the Beloved *always* opens the door to those who seek him, always welcome them to his table. For that, as the whole of the Gospels teach us, is the nature of Love.

To the glory of God. Amen.