

Being Prepared

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Readings: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 and Matthew 25:1-13

What is the Kingdom of Heaven?

Have you ever noticed that when Jesus wants to communicate something that is almost impossible to define, he turns to a parable? Ten virgin bridesmaids, five who are wise and five who are foolish. They are waiting for the return of the bridegroom, but when the bridegroom is delayed only those who prepared for a wait with extra fuel for their lamps are able to see the bridegroom. The bridegroom does not recognize those whom come late because they were unprepared.

It is a nice story, it is a wonderful beginning to a folktale, but what does it tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven? As with many of Jesus' parables, they are not meant to be read to create some sort of theological definition or elaborate ethical system. They are meant to make us work in a right attitude. Most of the time tales of this nature are meant for us to locate ourselves inside the story. Who are we in the story? Who do we want to be in the story? Who does God want us to be in the story? In this text, it seems that we find ourselves somewhere between the wise or foolish bridesmaids. While we wait on the Lord to renew our strength, who are we?

The Kingdom is not the Spirit of the Age

The first thing that I can tell you that the kingdom is not, is the Spirit of the age. This is a term that has fallen out of use, but I believe that it holds a certain relevancy to us. The use of this term is a set of ideas, beliefs, and aims that is typical of people in a particular period in history. It is too easy for us to take whatever belief is dominant and fits with our sociological or psychological needs. Then we turn cram that into faith. Just as every age from Jesus' to ours has attested, some of the things that we believed were so essential to our existences are now literally history.

A little caveat here, I am not suggesting that we ignore the needs of our society in the here and now for some sort of future paradise. This has never been biblical and most often what Jesus is countering. If we think that we can ignore science, the environment, or our human rights responsibilities to one another, this runs counter to an understanding of a living faith. No, what we are looking toward is revelation, the tearing back of the curtain so that we can see the divine's hands in and amongst us. That will not be done by clamoring for or against a political party, nor will it come from charitable thinking. It can only begin when we oil our lamps with love for God, self and neighbor, but I am getting ahead of myself. What else is not something we are looking for in the kingdom of heaven?

The Kingdom is not Nostalgia for the Past

I remember visiting my great grandmother when she was in her late 90's and well past her centenary. I loved talking to her about her past. There was one thing that always made me

quite nervous. Grandma Mary had a magazine called, "The Good Old Daze" that someone always left for her. It was supposed to be a historical remembrance of yesteryear, but even at a young age, I realized that it was mostly advertising from the past of something that never existed to get her to purchase things in the present that she really didn't need.

Expectation is about hope for the future, not a continually reliving of our glorious past. Jesus' parable is pregnant with expectation. The reason those who are considered wise are that they have prepared for the wait of the one that their hope and anticipation is invested.

I am completely convinced that Immanuel Presbyterian Church has a glorious past. It is written on the walls in wonderful plaques, it is shown through amazing architecture, and we enjoy it in the amazing space in which we worship. I also am convinced that we cannot have faith that survives on that history.

Sandia will not be what it was in the past. "Albuquerque's suburban growth" that was dreamed about in the 1940's and 1950's and talked about on the plaque outside the entrance will never return. Route 66 will never be recommissioned as a highway. Our children who grew up in this congregation, this community, have moved. Some have moved on from being Presbyterian and others have moved on to other communities and states. Nob Hill will change in the nature of what it is and what it represents to this neighborhood. We are who we are today, not who we were yesterday.

The access to the divine, the kingdom, is for us in this moment. We have all that we need, don't ever let anyone convince you that you need more than we have in this moment to meet the divine. Otherwise there can be no reason to pray the prayer Jesus taught us, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We don't need more money, more people, more youth or even more faith to experience the divine. We may not be in the heyday, but we are right where we need to be.

The Kingdom is waiting in preparation for the coming of God

But, Brian, I want an experience that fulfills all my needs, that meets me where I am, that heals all the thorns in my flesh so that I am released! I am not here to give you that good hope. Faith is not wish fulfillment. The kingdom of heaven is not a dictionary definition, but a parable. We might need to wait, well prepared for the bridegroom. Even Jesus had to feel forsaken in the end to experience resurrection.

We come here to worship the God who has done great things, but may leave us feeling uneasy for weeks, months or years by being elusive. I take great hope in hearing the mystics writings about the pain in the absent God, the dark night of the soul, or those who have had such an intense vision of the divine only to be left doing God's work the rest of their existence and hoping that their vision wasn't a lapse into insanity.

That is often where many of us in the Presbyterian Church find ourselves. Immanuel Presbyterian Church is atypical, its problems are very ordinary and they are not unique. We find ourselves as those who believe, but need help in their unbelief. We want to believe in the

miraculous possibility of regeneration, but are tired of waiting on the Lord to renew our strength. Unfortunately, if you are looking for anyone to give you a silver bullet to the answer of waiting, that might cost you more money than you can afford and might cost you more than money, but might cost you a soul in the process. I am with you in this impatient preparation for the coming of God. We are not called to be successful, but to be faithful. So, here we are waiting. I will get the oil to light our lamps and make sure you bring warm cloths because I believe that the kingdom is coming. It will not be what I want, but I know it is what I need. Thanks be to God.