

**“Are You Ready?”**

*“And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut” (Matthew 25:10).*

Last Monday, a young member of our congregation took a professional certification test. He recently graduated from college and was blessed to find employment in his chosen profession, but his future in this job was completely contingent on passing this exam. If he passed the test, then his position was secure...but if he failed, then the career he had hoped for and the future that he had worked so hard to achieve would be over before it started. It was that simple. Pass or fail. It all came down to this one test. You can imagine the kind of pressure he was feeling as the day of the exam drew closer and when I saw him at church last Sunday morning I wished him well and then asked him one question: “Are you ready?”

“*Are you ready?*” is exactly the question implied in today’s reading from Matthew. In the form of a parable about a wedding feast, Jesus challenges His disciples with a teaching about Judgment Day that leaves all of us more than a little uneasy. You see, this story comes after some of His boldest words about the Last Day in which He announced, “you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matthew 24:44).

“*You must be ready.*” When we consider these words in light of the parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids, we naturally begin to wrestle with questions of readiness and this is what they sound like: Have I done enough? Does my life reflect my faith? Is my witness consistent with God’s commands? Have I shown God that I am worthy to stand before Him? Well, today I’m here to tell you that the unequivocal answer to all of these questions is: “Not a chance!”

Today in His Word, God strips away any pretense that we have done enough. Today in His Word, God shatters any illusion that we are worthy to stand before our Judge. Today in His Word, God kicks our self-sufficient legs out from underneath us and shows us the terrifying truth about ourselves. And today, this humbling Word comes to us in a harsh message from an ancient prophet.

In our first reading, Amos speaks a word of indictment and as this text opens, we hear the prophet addressing a people who felt they were ready and very secure in their own righteousness. God sent Amos to preach to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and, at this time in their history, Israel was successful and carefree. It was a time of extraordinary wealth and great prosperity. They had gone unchallenged by their enemies and on the surface, things couldn’t have looked better. Yet for all of their accomplishments, Israel had turned their backs on God.

The rulers of Israel exploited the people. The rich made their fortunes on the backs of the poor, the needy were abused, the weak were trampled, the Law of God was mocked and the religious leaders charged with their spiritual care had turned a blind eye to all of it. Now understand this: They still went through the motions of formal worship and they carried out the sacrifices that God had spelled out in His Word to keep them in a dependent faith, but in every way they were self-reliant and self-righteous.

These were the people to whom Amos was sent, but this scenario should sound all-too-familiar to our ears. The hypocrisy and abuses condemned by Amos are repeated each day in our world and, as tempting as it may be in this election week to blame those who hold opposing social or political ideas, the truth is that we find these very same sins when we look in the mirror.

You see Amos is not preaching to the world. He is not addressing some pagan nation. Amos is speaking to *God's* people! Amos is speaking to *us*! And this is what Amos says to his arrogant audience: "Woe to you who desire the day of Lord...It is darkness and not light...I hate your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your...offerings, I will not accept them" (Amos 5:18, 21-22). The message to Israel and the message to us is that going through the motions doesn't count! And God's Word leaves little doubt that on our own, we have rejected Him! That on our own, our lives don't reflect a witness consistent with His commands; that on our own, we have mistreated and marginalized others; that on our own, we face God's judgment and that on our own, we are not ready for the day of the Lord...*but God doesn't leave us on our own!*

Today, God speaks to us through this prophecy to help us and His help starts by destroying the false faith and idolatrous idea that we can be ready on our own. In Proverbs, God tells us, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10) and the fear of God's judgment created by Amos and echoed in the words of Jesus should scare us to death, drive us to acknowledge our need for help and lead us to the one and only place where true help can be found. The word that captures all of these actions is the word repentance. And a repentant heart before God is the only way we can have a heart truly ready for God.

We can't get ourselves ready and this fact bothers us to no end, because every experience we have in this world tells us that our success or failure depends on us. Earlier, I mentioned the young man who had to pass the exam in order to keep his job. Well, I'm happy to report that he passed his test and he passed because he studied hard. In the days and weeks and months leading up to the exam, he spent hours preparing, and that certainly is the way the world works. But if we have to take a test on Judgment Day, then we're in big trouble. Because no matter how hard we work and no matter how much we do; no matter how often we come to church; no matter how much we give, no matter how much Scripture we can recite by memory...there's nothing we can do to prepare ourselves for this day of reckoning. We simply cannot do it and the truth is we *will* die trying. But when God's Word shows us that this is our reality and when our hearts break...in that moment of honesty, in that moment of surrender, in that moment of emptiness and desperation...God speaks. And His Word of promise tells us that He has done it all.

Jesus told the "Parable of the Ten Virgins" as He prepared to go to the cross. The end was near and just days before He would die for the sins of the world, He told His disciples this parable to help them to cling to the words of promise that He had given. His entire ministry had pointed to what He would do to save us. He is the one whose life was consistent with God's commands. He is the one whose works matter. He is the one who forgives sin. He is the one who gives life...*and He is one who makes sinners ready.*

Christians have always worried about this question of being ready. It's what Paul addressed in today's second reading when he wrote to the Thessalonians as they wondered if they would be ready for Christ's return. And to these weak and weary believers – these people just like us – Paul said, "we do not want you to be unformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, that you may not grieve as the rest of men who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep" and Paul then gives a detailed description of the coming of the Bridegroom and concludes this remarkable section of Scripture by saying, "Therefore encourage each other with these words" (I Thessalonians 4:13-14, 18).

My friends, these are God's promises to us as well. And this Gospel of Jesus Christ frees us. It frees us from the fear that we haven't done enough. It frees us to care. It frees us to give. It frees us to live our lives for others because we know how the story ends, and with faith in this Gospel we are completely prepared and perfectly ready to meet our Lord. Go in peace and encourage each other with these words. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold