

“Why? No: What” (8Nov2020)
Matt25:1-13; Amos5:18-24; 1Thes4:13-18

This actually sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Having to wait and wait past the middle of the night for the right man and the arrival of a celebration.

It sounds a lot like Tuesday night. Or Friday. Or all the moments this week some of us were anxiously burning our candles at both ends. And that's even without trying to factor in margins of 50% foolish people and 50% wise.

But this story isn't about election results and preferred presidential candidates. Or...they're not the starring characters, even if they fit in.

To get there, let's back it up, because I've heard multiple of you having trouble with this parable from Jesus, even without trying to tie in politics. Lisa Johnsen, for one, said on Thursday she was eager to hear what I was going to do with this challenging reading. So let's see what we can do.

First, I'd like to point out that it's a story, a fantastically brief short story, its plot with compelling little turning points, filled with surprise. Now, I know you've already been shocked lots this week. You could use some calm expected turns of events. But that also means you know how such shockers find their way into our narratives. Nobody would have interest in a story where every detail turned out as predicted. If Little Red Riding Hood just went for a walk in the woods and saw her grandma: dull.

So this short story from Jesus is filled with twists in happenstance.

Ten girls are invited to a wedding. That's good news. They all made the guest list. Whether or not they were in fact ready for such an event, each and every one was invited to be there. So maybe they put on little black dresses and tried applying makeup and were an entourage excited for dancing and partying and maybe a taste of wine.

They headed off to the gathering, but a first twist is that the festivities didn't go off as planned.

The groom was late. Jesus doesn't bother to tell us Why. It's not about explanations that the guy spilled on his rental tux or that he got a flat or was at the casino trying to fund the honeymoon or saw somebody injured and stopped to help. It's not the Why. It's the simple What: he's late.

I had a wedding once when things got put on hold. The bride's grandma was delayed with transportation to load up her wheelchair. We were about 45 minutes, if I recall, after the planned start waiting for Mrs. Gage to arrive. Fortunately, the guests didn't get too antsy in that time and nobody left. But it certainly wasn't as planned and we had to roll with it. That's life.

Well, these girls waiting for the festivities to begin hung out chatting and laughing, expecting any minute they'd get on with it. Still no groom. Then they got bored and just sat there scrolling on their phones. Still no groom. Then they drifted off to sleep.

But then! “Wake, awake! for night is flying, the watchmen on the heights are crying. Midnight hears their welcome voices, and at the thrilling cry rejoices: ‘Awake, you maidens, the wait is past! The bridegroom comes at last! Rise up with willing feet; go forth, the bridegroom meet! Alleluia!” At least, that's how the approach is heralded by hymnwriter Philipp Nicolai.

Right then, at the cusp of joy and celebration, comes the next twist in Jesus' short story: half of the girls' lamps had burned out. There really had been no reason for more oil; they were going to the wedding in the day and only needed to get home after. The other five—for some foolish reason—brought along extra jugs of oil. Maybe they were thinking the wedding feast was a potluck and they'd add some more olive oil.

Again, we don't get a Why, just a What. Things sometimes turn out that way. I was a Boy Scout and learned the motto “Be Prepared.” So I brought a flashlight to the children's gathering organized by Andrea Olson a week ago, but when I pulled it out to show Thomas Wildman, who had brought one of his own, I discovered my batteries were

dead. A light that wouldn't light. It happens. That's life.

Next comes a pair more twists in the short story, though. The girls with extra oil refuse to share, and those without decide that midnight is a good time to run off into the dark to buy more. There were no 24-hour convenience stores; still the market shops in the Old City of Jerusalem lock up tight at dark.

The ensuing punchline, if you will, seems harsh. The girls get back from their errand—with or without oil, we don't know—to find they missed out on the party. After all of that.

I suggest it's because those girls thought oil was more important than the wedding itself. Maybe all ten girls were too focused on oil, but half of them stayed put, ready to party. The other five left, just as the celebration was about to get started, obsessed instead with their preparation. In the end, the groom essentially says, If oil is more important than being with me, go have a party with your dumb little lamps, because you didn't really seem interested in me.

Making this short story into an allegory for us and our relationship with Jesus still leaves plenty of Why questions that don't get answered. We only know What is.

Why is Jesus so late to the party? No answer. Why is he leaving us to keep waiting? No answer. Why doesn't he take responsibility for it being essentially his fault some miss out? No answer. Why don't some of us girls with enough find a way to share? No answer, or at least no good answer.

There's one question I don't believe the story is interested in at all: Why don't we have enough oil? We may also wonder what the oil represents, what it stands for, what we need to be prepared with. But that misses the essential point. In Hitchcock's terms, it's a MacGuffin. We yet again go off chasing into the darkness in search of something we can't track down anyway. We go hunting for things we find more desirable than Jesus and getting to feast at the wedding buffet and dance the night away and fulfill our invitation

to the celebration all because the groom wants us there.

So we might go chasing off after acting in ways we think are holier as our preferred preparation. We probably want to offer light in the darkness. Or maybe to seem well-equipped. We might charge off after answers, thinking we need to figure out something about God or Jesus or our world or morality or whatever. We convince ourselves that responses to the virus prove whether we're wise or foolish. We might chase after our sense of justice, even though Amos told us it will come rolling down from God and pour over us. We traipse off to substitute second-rate celebrations. Or we make proper politics our oil of choice and might stumble through dark hours fixated on election returns as the most important thing; it's certainly how I felt last week, paired with my wondering why Jesus doesn't just show up quicker to fix what I'm fixated on. Why won't he? [Shrug.]

What makes the difference isn't keeping our pet projects well-oiled but is that Jesus says Welcome. Come. I want there to be a party with you. All of you. Even if not on our terms or timeframe, that's where our focus remains, without Why but trusting in What, or more precisely: Who.

Just to show the truly extraordinary extent of that, since we have so much that already distracts us and draws us away, it's worth holding onto 1st Thessalonians with the obvious concern that death could interrupt getting to the celebration. If any of the girls keeled over while waiting for the groom, that would seem an unresolvable twist. But Paul reminds us we don't grieve as those who have no hope.

Yes, we may still grieve, even today. Yes, waiting has been hard. Yes, we sure wish the waiting could be different. Yes, we want clear answers for Why things are like this. Yes, it would be so very nice not to have any grief at all, no death, no sorrow, no laments, no divisions, no hatred, no lies, no worry, no virus. Yes, there is still

plenty of other good we can focus on. But since this is and remains What is, What life is, we do have hope, with our focus clearly on the groom and his party. And we sure could use some hope, so let's not go chasing off in wrong directions.

Hymn: "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning"
(NCH 369)