

Bridging the Gap

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

23rd Sunday after Pentecost - November 8, 2020

Texts: Amos 5:18-24, Psalm 70, Matthew 25:1-13

SCRIPTURE READING Amos 5:18-24

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 70

Come swiftly, O God, and renew me. My joy, make haste to help me!

Let me face my weaknesses and all that confuses me;
help me understand all that keeps me from you.

Come swiftly, O God, and renew me. My joy, make haste to help me!

Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.

Let those who love your salvation say evermore, "God is great!"

Come swiftly, O God, and renew me. My joy, make haste to help me!

When I am low in spirit, and filled with fears, be near me, O God!

You are my help and my deliverer; my hope, do not delay!

Come swiftly, O God, and renew me. My joy, make haste to help me!

GOSPEL READING Matthew 25:1-13

A little context is in order for this reading: Matthew wrote for a community of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians located probably in Syria. He wrote sometime in the last quarter of the first century. A full generation had passed since Jesus lived, died, rose again, and ascended to heaven promising to return again. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, and with it Jewish hopes for a renewed nation. Followers of the Jesus Way included more and more non-Jews. When Jesus' second coming was delayed, first for years, then for decades, people began to doubt. Some grew weary with waiting. And some fell away from the faith. Matthew warns the community to stay awake and watch. How? Love God, love your neighbor, and you will keep hope alive.

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise (*a better translation is "prudent"*). When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise/prudent took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the prudent replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the

dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.’

I remember, as a new Christian, when a mature friend told me, “Never pray for patience! God will send you lessons you never wanted!” She was joking; but it’s true, the only way to learn something really well is to practice a lot. What I want to know is, who did all that praying for patience this year? I think we’ve had enough practice, don’t you? I agree with the psalmist: **“Come now, God. Renew us today. Hasten to help us! Enough with the waiting!”**

Waiting is hard. Waiting for the pandemic to end, waiting to be together in person again, waiting for votes to be counted and results called. Even as I was preparing for worship yesterday, news reached me that *that* particular wait had ended. And yet - I’m waiting to see if as a nation we remember that what signaled joy and relief for some meant bitter disappointment for others. I was moved and touched by a blog written earlier this week by a pastor friend, called: “I don’t accept the election results.” She wrote: “I don’t accept that we are against each other and unable to find common ground. I reject the assertion that we are hopelessly polarized and divided. I will not concede that some people don’t care about basic human needs. We all need food and home and belonging and love. ... [And so] I will seek common ground, and join in a shared reality that upholds the needs and lives of all. I will be led by love and guided by hope.”

No matter how we felt about the other one at the top of the ballot, can we remember that the millions who voted for that person are more than carbon copies, or little extensions, of them? That all those other millions are not our enemies; they are our neighbors, our friends, often our own family members? That their feelings are as raw and real as our own? That they feel as they do for reasons we can’t condemn without at least trying to understand? No matter how you feel today, you know we have a long way to go to heal as a nation. We need - dare I say it? - we need to have patience. And faith. We need to hang onto hope, now more than ever.

Like the early Christians Matthew addressed, we stand in a gap, a time between certainties. Sometimes it feels like we’ve stepped off solid ground onto a bridge we thought would lead us to a better place, a bridge firmly fixed on both ends, only to find half-way across that the bridge is broken; it ends in air, in nothingness. We pray the bridge will be constructed as we go. But when we look down, we see that the pylons that held the bridge in place are also revealed as corroded, corrupted. That this nation has a hidden history that doesn’t always match our ideals of liberty and justice for all. When it becomes obvious that inequities remain and problems aren’t resolved immediately with a change in leadership, some may doubt and despair.

This was the case for some of the early believers: Jesus promised to return. He promised a lot of other things, too. If he hasn’t returned yet, maybe he never will. Maybe we can’t trust anything

he said. They ran out of fuel, and coasted back down to the place they started. They couldn't wait; they hadn't reckoned on the delay. Maybe if they had been content to wait in the dark, the bridegroom would still have welcomed them. Who knows? Rushing off is so human of them! And so human of us. We distrust the dark, we dislike uncertainty. We hate waiting without knowing. But in the dark, in the uncertainty, is where we learn patience and where we learn faith.

I don't think Matthew is saying some bridesmaids were good people and some were bad; I think he's stating a truth that some things can't be transferred wholesale to someone else. I can tell you about my faith, but I can't give it to you, like moving funds from one bank account to another. I can lecture you about patience but I can't pour it into you like water into a glass. You need your own experience, your own conviction, your own grounding, your own anchor. Matthew's final caution says, "Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour" - but all of them fell asleep, foolish and prudent ones alike. In the end, we all fall short of perfection. And none of us knows for sure if the bridge leads to solid ground on the other side, or whether it will collapse under us, or whether it will end in thin air, so that we fall into nothingness. We are all trying to bridge the gap between past certainty and future mystery. Tomorrow remains unknown.

That gap between Jesus' life on earth and his second coming has stretched to 2000 years in length. And yet people hang on; faith remains alive. Each new generation of believers might be the last, and yet, somehow, it's not. Somehow, that first side of the bridge is anchored firmly enough for people to dare it. Even if the other side is shrouded and shaky, people keep crossing, steppin out in faith. The only way I can explain it is that what holds each end steady, the visible and the invisible, is real. God is real. Christ's presence with us is real. Our hope rests on something more than a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow - it rests on life that lasts beyond the unknown of death. Our lamps are filled, and filled, and filled again by something we can't see, something we can't transfer from one person to another, but which we know is there.

I hope you listen closely when we get to the part of the service offered by our newest members, our confirmands, sharing what stewardship means to them. Each one gives their own take. I am grateful, because they face dilemmas of global dimensions that I couldn't have imagined at their age. But, to paraphrase one of them, "when you meet up with something you can't understand, sit back, take a deep breath, and let the Holy Spirit fill you up like air, and you'll feel better."

What fills your lamp? What keeps you going through times of disappointment, uncertainty, doubt? What keeps you loving your neighbor through times of suspicion, distrust, and fear? What keeps you anchored in a community of faith when the traditional ways of gathering and comforting one another are off limits? What convinces you of God's steady presence in your life even when you feel abandoned and alone? What fills your lamp? Isn't it love, love that seeks you out and finds you in the most unexpected places, maybe even in the unexpected kindness of someone whose campaign sign didn't match your own? Love that prompts you to reach beyond

the fake boundaries and barriers we've barricaded ourselves inside, love that prompts you to meet another person as human, hurting, capable of loving back?

Yesterday, after I corralled most of my thoughts into coherence, I hopped on my bike for a spin around the lake near my house. Everyone and her dog was out, with every conceivable mode of transportation, with every conceivable skin tone, language, and style of dress, from women in billowing burkas to bare-chested men in running shorts. We were all buffeted by the same wind, blessed by the same sunshine. I couldn't tell how anyone voted; they couldn't tell how I voted, or even if I had voted at all. We were just one people, one nation, under God. Thank God.

We don't need to limit our compassion, our justice, our righteousness to those we resemble or agree with; we cannot turn our backs on one another, and survive for long in this world. We can remember instead "that we all are a mess of contradictions: selfishness and beauty, love and obliviousness, trying and failing," people who need each other desperately; and that "the loss of what we thought we were can lead to what we can be." We cannot let fear or division be the ultimate winner in this election, any more than we can let hate speech be our guide.

It doesn't matter that we don't know the day or the hour of Jesus' return. Today is God's day. Here is where Christ is fully present. Now is the time to make a difference. O Christ, our joy, make it so. Make it so. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

Lord, our Lord, in all the earth, how great your name. May your people's hearts be turned today toward you above all; may we embrace those you embrace, welcome those you welcome, love those you love - which is to say, every person and creature under heaven. Move us to tear down walls and mend rifts that divide us. Equip us to be gentle and generous agents of your grace.

**As we see coronavirus cases building and surging in our own communities, lead us to treasure the well-being of others as we value our own; protect those who risk their lives daily to care for those who are sick, as well as those who teach and nurture our children. May differences be forgotten in our common goal of well-being for all.

**We remember places and people distressed by the ongoing effects of wildfires, hurricanes, and storms, as well as by war and civil unrest: in places like Nigeria, and Nagorno Karabakh; may the international community rise to aid them,

**As some rejoice and others mourn in the aftermath of this fraught election season, make us sensitive to one another's needs and burdens; help us to listen more than we speak.

** Remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven...."

I am indebted to Pastor Kara Root of Nokomis Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis for insights in her blog of November 4, 2020. Everything in quotes is from that blog:

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2020/11/i-dont-accept-results-of-election.html>