

Who will you serve?

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-28, Matthew 25:1-13

I read a short political commentary earlier this week, it ran on election day in the Washington Post, and was written by one of their regular columnists, David Von Drehle. I don't read a lot of commentary, but the title of this one drew me in: "The presidency has come to occupy too much space in the American Psyche."

His point, in short, is that the office of the President, the person in it, the race to capture that office, has come to occupy so much of our national attention, so much media time, so much money, that it absorbs so much energy and attention from people on both sides of the political aisle, that we don't pay enough attention to the importance of our own role as citizens in making our communities work.

We agonize and argue about who will be in office, that person becomes the source of hope for those who support them, a lightning rod for those that oppose them. And within a year or so of the inauguration they have inevitably not lived up to anyone's good or bad expectations and we're on to arguing about the next elections.

Von Drehle contends that the real work of citizenship doesn't flow down from the presidency – it flows up, from the grass roots – from us. The health and integrity of our community doesn't flow from the White House or Congress – it grows from the way we treat each other.

He ended with a story about two families in Pittsburgh – next door neighbors and long-time friends who found themselves divided by the hype of the election. One family put a Trump sign in their yard, the other put a Biden sign in their yard, but then, he said, "they realized something was missing, and each family added a homemade sign with an arrow pointing across the space between their homes. "We (Heart) Them," the signs declared."

That article triggered something in me when I read the Hebrew scripture lesson for this morning.

I suspect a lot of us are familiar with one verse in this morning's reading from the Hebrew Scripture – actually it's just part of a verse: the last half of Joshua 24:15 - "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord," as it says in the King James Version of scripture. It's one of those verses that tends to show up in religious art – whether it is a needlepoint your mother or grandmother made or a meme posted on Facebook.

But I'm afraid that in taking that little half verse out of context we've made something saccharine sweet out of a very challenging passage of scripture that I think speaks powerfully to where find ourselves right now.

We don't tend to read the book of Joshua a lot. In fact, I suspect most of us would be hard-pressed to say very much about who Joshua was. I mean we know he lead the people into the Promised Land after the Moses died, we know he "fought the battle of Jericho" like the old spiritual says, but beyond that the other 20 odd chapters of Jericho get pretty much forgotten.

There's a good reason for that: The other chapters are...complicated. Joshua led the people into the promised land with two assignments: 1) to conquer the Canaanites (Joshua 1-12) and 2) to settle the Israelite tribes in their allotted territories (Joshua 13-22).

That first mission is hard for us modern folks to look at. Back in Deuteronomy Israel was told to do what we in the modern world would call ethnic cleansing: To erase the temptation to worship other God's Israel they were to "not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them" (Deuteronomy 20:16-18). It's ugly stuff, and across the history of God's people it has been twisted into a rationalization for a lot of ugly behavior, including, if we're honest, the idea of "Manifest Destiny" and mistreatment of the native peoples of North America.

There's also the reality that Joshua never really finished this task. The later books of Judges make it clear that there are still many Canaanites in the land long after Joshua is gone, especially in the cities. Jerusalem itself is still held by a Canaanite people called Jebusites until David conquers it and makes it his capital centuries later.

The tribes aren't settled either: between their continued fights with the Canaanites and their fights with one another they can't agree on who owns what.

But Joshua is old, and he is about to die. So he assembles all the people of Israel at Shechem, a holy place where Abraham offered a sacrifice to God, and he tries to remind them who God is, and who they are.

This is a critical moment: the tribes are dividing up the land, and they won't have one, central leader. So Joshua is trying to remind them what makes them a people. He says look, you've been led all this way by the LORD – remember, that's a King James translation of the four Hebrew letters that make up the name of God, a proper name. We Christians now often transliterate it as Jehovah, but a friend of mine reminded me that in Hebrew tradition it's usually just replaced with "hashem", which means "the name". The LORD spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lord led you out of Egypt, the Lord fought on your behalf to give you this land. You can choose to follow the LORD, or you can choose to adopt the gods of the people here. I know which way I'm going – "for me and my house, we will serve the LORD," but now you choose.

And the people of course say "We will serve the LORD!" But then comes the kicker: Joshua says: "You can't". It won't work. You will ultimately forsake God, you won't live the way God tells you to. You'll follow other gods, you'll abandon God's ways, and God won't protect you anymore, you'll be lost. It's not like Joshua is making this up, by the way, if you read the books of Exodus and Joshua you can find plenty of times the people have already failed to follow God.

But the people are, well, people: always convinced that they can be better than they can actually be. "We will, serve the LORD, honest!" So Joshua says fine: But know that in the future when you inevitably fail, you've just testified against yourself. I'll put this stone here to remind you of your words. They bury Jacob there. Then tribes all go back to their own lands, and Joshua dies, and the rest of Hebrew history, with all its joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures, unfolds.

The people do fail. They abandon God often. Sometimes they abandon the LORD for the gods of the people around them, sometimes they serve the gods they create for themselves - money, power,

prestige – and in the process abandon the laws that God gave them to shape their lives together. They drift away, they get lost, they cry out, and God sends someone to find them and lead them back. And they dream of a time when God will come and bring them home for good.

Which brings us to our gospel lesson for today. At the end of his gospel Matthew has collected a whole set of “apocalyptic” visions. Remember, an apocalypse is not a disaster – it is a revelation. These are vision of the way that God’s presence in Christ will be revealed to the world. They only become bad news because so much of the world isn’t ready to see him, has set up their own way of living that isn’t God’s way.

And that is what Jesus is warning about in this parable. Something I need to say at the outset – if this parable bothers you – well – it should. There are troubling aspects to this parable – things that, on the surface at least, don’t make much sense.

Especially the ending warning “Therefore keep alert, because you don’t know the day or the hour!”

That may be true but what does it have to do with the story!?! After all, if you read carefully, ALL of the bridesmaids became drowsy and fell asleep. It was only a shout from someone else – “Look, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him” that sent them scurrying into action. None of them were alert.

But some of them were at least prepared. I think it’s also important to note what Jesus and Matthew are calling us to be prepared FOR. Not a judge walking into the courtroom, not a master returning to settle accounts, but a Bridegroom waiting to invite them to a feast.

That’s the way weddings worked in those days, after all. Even among the high mighty there was no such thing as an invitation only wedding. When I think of this wedding I think of the wedding in the musical “Fiddler on the Roof”, where the whole village, even the rejected former fiancé of the bride, is invited. The groom would parade down the street, go pick up his bride at her parent’s house, then bring her back to his house for a huge celebration. It’s not clear there was even a formal religious ceremony. Just a big party.

The bridesmaids Jesus is talking about aren’t “bridesmaids” in the sense we know them – special friends of the bride in matching dresses. They are just people who live in the same town who are waiting to celebrate their neighbor’s joy. Their only real role beyond that is bring a little light along the way – to brighten the path as the bridegroom, and eventually the bride and groom, make their way to a new life.

But to do that – they have to have light to share.

That wouldn’t have been a problem if the bride groom had come sooner, of course – they had their filled and burning at the beginning. What they didn’t have was the means to keep them burning as the Groom was delayed and the hours passed by.

Something else that may seem troubling about this parable: Why don’t the bridesmaid’s share their oil? Yes, some bridesmaids failed to plan ahead, but at the point they know that the bride groom is coming soon, why don’t the others show a little mercy and share?

Perhaps the answer is, because they can't. It might help to remember what oil represents in scripture. Oil isn't just fuel for lamps used for anointing – to mark God's presence with kings and prophets. Oil is still used in many Christian traditions as part of baptism, to mark the one who is baptized, as the seal of the Spirit on their hearts, minds, and souls. Oil is the presence of the Spirit in the here and now. You can't buy it, you can't borrow it. You have to seek it for yourself. You have to seek it in community with others.

I think that is what church is for. We often wonder what we can do as communities of faith to make what we offer more attractive to a culture increasingly disinterested with organized religion. We try to come the right words to pass on a particular set of beliefs, to convince people to believe and behave the way we think they should. Sometimes we even look to the world around us to gather the right amount of money or power or social influence to shape the world the way we believe it should be shaped.

But what if God isn't asking us to do any of that? What if God's only desire for us is to be a genuine community in a world where more and more people feel isolated? A community that celebrates together. That seeks God's Spirit together. A community that waits for the party together, making sure that everyone knows their invited and no one has to wait alone?

I think many of us have absorbed the notion that this parable is about waiting for Jesus to arrive, but what if it's not just that? What if it is also about being alert enough to recognize the ways that Jesus is already here? After all, Matthew tells us Jesus spent most of his ministry saying that the kingdom of God has arrived. Later on in this same section of Matthew he tells his disciples "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I was sick, and you comforted me.

That's where we find Jesus – in the things we do for others. That's where we get filled up. That's where we gather the fruit, the oil, the signs of presence of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. All of those things that no job or government or leader can provide us.

We are living in a time of deep division in our culture. Those divisions matter, our political systems matter; they are the way we order our life together. But as people of faith we are called to remember who we serve. Not a system of power of authority in this world. Not a human president or king.

We serve the Lord. The God of who offered Abraham the hope of a home, the God who offered Moses and his people freedom from bondage, the God who offers all us freedom from sin and death. The God who knows that we will stumble, fall, and at times even betray him, but who still longs to invite all of us to the Party. May God help us be ready for the invitation, and willing to light the way for others. AMEN