

A Day and an Hour Unknown

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 25:1-13

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By all accounts, this story that Jesus tells us seems like a very strange story. We have ten virgins or bridesmaids who all go out to meet the bridegroom at a wedding. Five of them we are told are wise, and five of them are foolish. The foolish ones we are told take their lamps with them but the foolish ones are foolish because they all forget to bring oil with them. But the wise ones are prepared. They bring their oil. Well, the bridegroom took a long time arriving and so all the bridesmaids became drowsy and sleep. But at midnight they all awake to the shout “Here comes the groom.” (Now, I have heard “here comes the bride” but never “here comes the groom”). But all the bridesmaids awake to the shout that the groom is coming and they all trim their lamps. The five wise ones also use their oil and prepare their lamps. And this is where our story gets interesting. For now the foolish bridesmaids who forgot to bring oil for their turn to the wise ones and say “Please share your oil with us.” But the wise say “No, there is not enough for both of us. Go out and buy some for yourselves.” So that is what the foolish bridesmaids do. They go out to buy oil for themselves. But while they are gone the groom arrives, and along with those wise bridesmaids who were prepared, they have a wedding banquet and shut the door. And so when the foolish bridesmaids get back from buying their oil they knock on the door saying “Ok, we’re ready for the banquet now. We’re ready to go, we’ve got our lamp oil.” But no one answers. So they knock again saying “Lord, Lord, let us in.” But the bridegroom says “Be gone! I do not know you. Be gone! Depart! I do not know you.”

What an odd story! How many questions it must leave us with! What kind of party or banquet doesn’t get started until midnight, and why couldn’t it start before the groom arrived,

and why on earth would the bridegroom lock the door for those bridesmaids who you would think were invited to be part of a wedding? It is all rather strange. It is like something from a dream that doesn't make any sense. But actually none of this is strange if you are the least bit familiar with wedding customs in Palestine. In Palestine there is a custom by which a wedding is not at a set time where everyone gets an invitation saying "You are cordially invited to the wedding of Smith and Jones at 4pm on Saturday October First." Instead, the wedding happens by surprise. It happens whenever the groom decides to show up for the wedding and the bridesmaids are all supposed to keep the bride company until the groom arrives. The groom will also try as hard as he can to come at a time when the bridesmaids are napping and catch them off guard. That's all part of the fun of the festivities—and yes, it is also true that once the bridegroom arrives, the door is shut and locked, and latecomers are not allowed entrance into the ceremony.

It all makes perfect sense if you are familiar with wedding practices from this other part of the world, but whether it makes sense to you or not, Jesus' message at the end of the story is clear. "Keep awake, be on watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour." And you don't have to be a bible scholar to know that he is not talking about the day and the hour of some Palestinian wedding; he is talking about the day and the hour of his return. For Christ is of course the bridegroom in this story, and we are the ones who are supposed to be the bridesmaids.

Sometimes as I'm sure you know, people of faith are accused of being be stuck in the past. When you go and visit Amish country down in Holmes County and you look at all the horse drawn carriages going down the road, you may have a sense that you are living in a different

century, as if sometime in the 1800s time suddenly stopped and has stood still ever since. I think there is much to admire about our Amish friends, but if you didn't care for their lifestyle you might say they are stuck in the past. I doubt that they would see it that way, but you might. Other people who are more cynical though might say that all this religion business is stuck in the past. "What are you doing spending so much of our time reading from a book that is thousands of years old" they might ask "reading all about events and singing songs about events that happened thousands of years ago?" Such people might say "You are all stuck in the past. A pox on every one of your houses."

As we look at today's gospel reading, however, I can't help but think about how people of faith sometimes don't live in the past at all but in the future, *completely* in the future. As Jesus tells us to keep awake, maybe you know some people who are so awake all they think about is the day of judgement. People who live as if the present doesn't matter at all, and their whole lives revolve around speculating and wondering when the last judgment going to be, when is Christ coming back. I remember years ago, in about the year 2009 or 2010, I saw a show about a family that was absolutely convinced that the world was coming to an end in 2012. Absolutely convinced. So convinced were they, in fact, that they decided to buy all kinds of things like new cars and furniture as long as it was a deal where they didn't have to make any payments until 2012. Apparently they thought "We'll never have to pay a cent, the world is coming to an end." I don't know what they're doing now. I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall in their home when the clock struck midnight on January 1st, 2013. I would have liked to have seen the looks on their faces. You might admire someone like that for sticking to their beliefs but think

that they would have done well to read the part of this story which says that no one knows the day or the hour.

But why shouldn't we know the day or the hour? Why doesn't God just tell us "Okay, I am coming back on April 26, 2021, or I am coming back on December 11, 2044, or I am coming back on May 6, 4455." Why not? Is it simply because it isn't ever going to happen? Is it because there will be no end? Don't pretend you haven't said that to yourself a time or two, of course you have. A lot of people down through the centuries have predicted the end of the world at a certain date and a certain time. Did all of them just not know their bibles? Did all of them just forget to read where the Lord says 'you know neither the day nor the hour'? I think that's a little hard to believe. They probably just convinced themselves that they ought to know the day and the hour. Why shouldn't we know the day and the hour?

But the amazing thing is not that one day this world will come to an end, that isn't amazing at all. What's so amazing is that we have even lived this long. After Jesus died and was raised and ascended into heaven the early church in those days were sure that Jesus would come back in their lifetime. In fact, they were sure that he would come back before any of them were even dead. But then about a generation went by and more and more people started dying and in places like the church in Thessalonica, people were alarmed. They said "What's going on?" Paul told them not to worry about those who have died. "One day the trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ will rise first." So with these words of comfort they stuck to their faith, and then they waited still longer. In fact they waited an entire century and Christ still didn't come back and the author of Second Peter again said "Do not worry. The Lord is not delayed in coming for with the Lord a thousand years are like one day and one day is like a thousand years." And still

we wait and every day someone else says “You know what, I’m tired of waiting. I don’t believe this is ever going to happen.” But you know, if you spend every day looking for Christ to return to this earth in some miraculous event, the problem is that you forget that every day is a miracle. And if God is so good to us, if God loves us so much so as to give us more time on this earth than we expected, to give us more time on this earth than we deserve, then why should that cause us to doubt and to lose faith?

I have read the bible from cover to cover more than once. I have read several books like Genesis and the gospels more times than I can count, and every time I read this bible, I am surprised at what I find in it. But not once, not one time have I ever read anything in the bible which says “We are promised tomorrow.” Not once. So what if every day, God decides to do more than he has promised and give us a new day on this earth? John Milton, the author of Paradise Lost famously said “the mind can make a hell of heaven and a heaven of hell.” Only we human beings, only we utterly sinful humans can so twist our own minds and twist logic to take something great and wonderful about God and use it to curse God and to doubt God. It is no cause to doubt God that the world hasn’t come to an end yet. Each day that you live above ground is a glorious day. What is it that we sing in our hymns? “All things bright and beautiful all creatures great and small. All things wise and wonderful the Lord God made them all. Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings, God made their glowing colors, God made their tiny wings.” Do you believe that? Do you? Well if you do, don’t let someone say to you “If God was real the world would have come to an end by now.” Baloney! You and I are not promised that tomorrow will come and if tomorrow we wake up to another day, I hope you get on your knees and say “What a miracle! What a miracle!”

As I have told all of you before my father died in the year 2014, just a couple months before I came here to be your pastor. But what I perhaps have not told you is that he almost didn't make it that long. In the year 2007 and into 2008 my father was in the hospital for about six months. He had an attack of pancreatitis that was so severe the doctors gave him about a forty percent chance of survival. Well, one day he had surgery to remove all the necrotic tissue from his pancreas and he started to turn around, his vital signs started getting better. He had been on a ventilator for a while, but after the surgery they eventually they took him off the ventilator and he could breathe on his own. But so many times when it looked like he was about to make a full recovery he would face a setback where he would get pneumonia or he would get a blood clot and well, it was just one thing after another. So, finally one day he came home and one day shortly thereafter he came to church with us. On his way out the door that day he turned to George Head who was the pastor of our church and my father told him all about his ordeal and said "You know, I'm lucky to be alive."

George said, "We all are, sir, you just know it more than most of us." That's right. We are all lucky to be alive. We are all blessed to be alive.

How rarely do we think about the fact that this world and this universe should have nothing in it. There should not be one day in this universe in which anything has life or anything exists. Nothing comes out of nothing. If you have nothing in your coat pocket and you check your coat pocket ten minutes later, I promise you will still have nothing in your coat pocket. Is it a miracle that one day this world will come to an end? That isn't the miracle. It is a miracle that we are here at all. "Keep awake," Jesus says, "because you do not know the day or the hour."

Keep awake because you are not promised tomorrow. And if tomorrow comes, be sure to get on your knees and thank God.