

Be Alert! Be Ready!

November 12, 2017

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Texts: Matthew 25:1-13; Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Both of these scriptures come from what might be considered “pivot points” in their respective stories. The Deuteronomy passage purports to be the last speech that Moses is giving to the children of Israel before they cross into the promised land. He is going to die soon, and a new leader, Joshua, will lead them into their new life.

Jesus, in the Gospel passage, is also near the end of his life. Soon his disciples will have to put into practice all that he has taught them as they carry on without him. In both passages, life as it has been is about to end, and new beginnings are around the corner. We all can imagine such pivot points in our own lives – graduations, weddings, the birth of a child, the death of a parent or spouse, retirement. But if there is anything that we have learned in recent years, and last weekend, it is that there are often pivot points that we don’t plan, and that can come at any time – a tornado, a job layoff, a terrible accident, a mass shooting, an election. In all of these cases there is the potential for a sudden ending to life as it has been and a new beginning to life under different circumstances.

The families in Sutherland Springs, TX didn’t think that they were coming to such a point last Sunday morning when they gathered for worship, about the same time that we were gathering for worship. When parents were shushing their little ones, when older people were trying to get comfortable in a pew, none of them imagined that they were moments away from their last moments together.

When President Trump was elected one year ago this past week, whether you were one who supported him or one who opposed him, I don’t think anyone really anticipated how different life would be under his presidency. We don’t talk with one another in the same ways – we listen for clues about ‘which side’ someone is on before we will speak freely. I have heard of families who no longer get together because they can’t talk together. His election was another kind of pivot point in our country, as elections sometimes are. Since his election, the usual standards about facts and truth have come under fire, and so there is a diminishing national consensus about reality. In our gospel reading last week, Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Truth matters. As people of the Gospel, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be truth seekers and truth speakers. Discernment is even more important than it has always been. What is the truth? For Christians, truth is found at the intersection of God’s Word and our current circumstances. We need to learn to look at the world with Kingdom eyes, to let God’s word read us.

The passage from Matthew about the bridesmaids is usually thought to be about the end times, but that is not something we talk about much. Are we really expecting Jesus to return in some way that would be widely recognizable? Or is it possible that as Jesus discusses the Kingdom of Heaven, what he called the Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Luke,

he is talking about the ongoing transformative action of God in the world, the alternate understanding of reality that does not place facts in dispute, but understands the meaning of things differently? So that in our contemporary culture, some people are more important than others, but in Biblical reality, each person is valuable, each person carries holiness within them, each person bears the image of God. In our contemporary culture, immigrants and refugees are feared and resented, but in Biblical reality, we welcome the immigrant and the refugee, recognizing that our spiritual ancestors were refugees from slavery in Egypt, and that for most of us, our national ancestors were immigrants and often refugees from Europe, seeking a place where they could worship God freely and seek a better life. In our contemporary culture value is determined by economics and the contribution to the bottom line, but in Biblical reality people, creatures, and the Earth have intrinsic value as part of God's creation.

In our passage from Deuteronomy, we are reminded that we are always facing choices, and that in each choice, we have the opportunity to follow God or to move away from God, to choose love or hate, to choose hope or fear, to choose discipleship or some other value system. When we place these two texts in conversation, suddenly we can see that as disciples we need to be alert to issues of discernment, we need to be ready to recognize the choices before us, we need to be prepared to notice signs of God's Kingdom. So that when a friend asks us to cheat on an assignment, we can recognize that doing this will undermine our integrity and lead us away from truth. And when someone suggests that lying is actually better than telling the truth because it makes someone feel better, we can understand that feeling good isn't always the most important thing and if it requires lying, it's not the way to the joy and peace that God intends for us. And when horrific evil or unspeakable tragedy enters our lives, how do we make meaning of it? Can we imagine reconciliation? Are we able to find our way to hope, and to embodying hope in our actions?

Jesus calls us into community, he called his disciples into radical communities of accountability, vulnerability, and trust. And in small communities, they studied God's Word, broke bread together, prayed with and for one another, and shared with one another. We develop discernment in community with the Bible and with one another—we learn from that great cloud of witnesses whose stories are told in the Bible, and from the brothers and sisters in our midst. But discipleship really does require vulnerability—to God and to each other. This is perhaps the greatest takeaway I've received in my travels to Colombia—their churches are not just one more activity in their lives; they are the context through which they interpret and live their lives. Many of us have been a part of some kind of vital community experience if only briefly—as part of a play, or a winning team, or even a political campaign, perhaps in a twelve-step group—can we imagine forming that kind of community in church? I'm not suggesting that we would not be involved in other organizations—I'm just wondering if we can imagine being vulnerable enough to one another that we could share our deepest hopes, our bitterest failures, our anger at life, our despair with evil. Can we weep together and laugh together and sweat together and share our lives as we work together with one another and with God for the transformation of the world? Can we allow our relationships with one another to be part of the way that God transforms us?

Lately in our presbytery we've been occasionally discussing the difference between a membership model of church and a discipleship model of church. For many years, we were content with a membership model where the church was one of the many organizations that made up our civic life. We belonged to the church like we belonged to Rotary, or to a political party, or a country club, or to various interest organizations. Recently, more people are talking about a discipleship model of church, where we gather with other disciples, seeking to learn and understand how to live as people of God in the world, seeking to faithfully discern God's mission in the world and to join in it, and our participation in other organizations continues but as part of the way we serve God in the world, by caring for God's good creation, or God's hungry children, or working for God's justice, or seeking to live out God's mission of reconciliation. We are recognizing that discipleship isn't just one of the many things we do, but a way of being in the world that shapes every choice, every action, every relationship.

Living as a disciple is challenging in our modern context that defines the world in secular terms. It's easy to lose track of our identity as children of God and to lose focus on God's mission in the world, unless we are actively participating with other believers in the kind of community that nurtures discernment.

In each of this morning's readings, the leader of the faith community was speaking with urgency to his followers because he knew how hard it is to live in the world and discern God's ways. Moses and Jesus each spent time in prayer, seeking God's presence, learning to understand themselves in God, and they were trying to impress upon their followers that it's easy to lose track of God's ways in the world. And it that was true in their world, how much truer is it for us with our many distractions and ?

Moses told the people of Israel "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." And this followed his reminder to love God with all your heart and all your soul—spend time with God and God's Word. We wouldn't expect to develop an instinct for cooking without spending time in the kitchen, practicing recipes, and learning how different cooking methods work, and which seasonings add what flavors. We wouldn't run a race without training for it, maybe getting together with friends to run and compare notes; plus cross-training and developing our core. But many of us assume we can live the life of faith, develop a moral compass and a sense of discernment without spending time with God, without taking the time to learn what the teachings of Jesus mean, without being part of an intentional community within which to practice accountability.

This is stewardship season—what do our financial pledges have to do with all of this? Part of the reason that we make financial commitments to the church is to practice letting go of the attachments that can keep us from deepening our commitment to God. Part of the reason we make financial commitments to the church is that we want to practice generosity. As we practice choosing God with our money, we learn to choose God with our

words and actions too. We need to practice choosing God, because we don't always know when those pivot points will come, and we want to be ready to recognize them, and alert to the choices they present. Part of the reason that we make financial commitments to the church is because we understand that the church is a mission outpost of God's Kingdom—reaching out to the poor and the vulnerable, the lonely and the hungry, the grieving and the ill with the Good News of the living, loving God who notices and is present with each of us.

These are challenging times. Many people are discouraged and despairing, without hope and without friends. Some are turning to drugs, others are turning to violence. It is a time when the church could offer hope, radical community, and meaning. Any moment could be a pivot point for us—each choice has the potential to lead us deeper into God, or drive us deeper into the world, and the world can be a hard and lonely place. Sometimes those pivot points come in big crises like the people of Sutherland Springs faced last week. Other times they come as moral dilemmas where we are faced with being honest or shading the truth, being selfish or being compassionate, choosing hope or choosing fear. All the time we are faced with making meaning of our lives within the greater life of God in the world. We need to embrace the truth that God is with us, that each of us matters, that our choices matter, and that we can indeed change the world. And the world needs us to speak that truth loud and clear. For Christ's sake.

Amen.