

## **Are You Ready for the Bridegroom?**

Matthew 25:1-13

Today's passage talks about how Christians should always keep themselves prepared for Jesus' return. As you might imagine, everyone has a different idea of what Christians should do to keep themselves ready.

For some people, the thing they do is try to interpret events in the present day as warnings that Jesus is about to return. I think these folks see it as their mission to keep everyone else ready for Jesus' return.

Back in January of this year a dairy farmer up in Portage County went out to his barn to look at his herd of cows one day. To his horror he found lots of them dead or dying. He tried to figure out what happened. It didn't look like anything was wrong. They hadn't been sick or anything.

The news got a hold of it and reported the mysterious death. No one could say right away what caused the death of 200 cows. But a pastor in Indiana read the news report and decided he had an answer.

Pastor Paul Begley of Knox Indiana, who serves Community Gospel Baptist Church, claims that the death of these cows, along with the sudden deaths of thousands of birds near the Arkansas River, are a warning from God that the return of Jesus is near.

Pastor Begley posted a video on the internet where he talks about how these deaths are the fulfillment of prophecy from the book of Hosea. By the way, Hosea is one of the oldest books in the Old Testament and says absolutely nothing about Jesus.

Now some people may just write Pastor Begley off as some uninformed country preacher who takes biblical passages out of context to support his own viewpoint. But as you can imagine, the folks at CNN and Time magazine thought his viewpoint was important to the national discussion on faith.

So they both interviewed him and gave him the opportunity to express his views to a national audience. He was more than happy to explain why God killed these cows and these birds. God's trying to get our attention. And anyone who isn't a Christian better get ready because someday Jesus is going to come back. And then it will be too late.

And you wonder why it's so hard to get people to come through the doors of this place? Has to be a Baptist church, doesn't it? Anyway, that farmer with the dead cows in Portage County decided that even though the theological explanation was interesting, he wanted a second opinion.

He contacted a veterinarian who tested the cows and did some autopsies. Turns out that the cows ingested some moldy sweet potatoes, and that the mold turned toxic, which gave the cows a version of food poisoning.

The problem is that every time something like this happens, and someone like Pastor Begley interprets the event in terms of what God is doing in the world, it makes a mockery of people who seriously want to be faithful to God and live as though life could end any day, even if they're not worried about when Jesus is coming back.

So the question I want to pose for you this morning is, "Is it possible to live a Christian life for as long as we live, to be faithful, and diligent, to live in expectation of whatever it is that God has next for us, and do so without interpreting every natural disaster or spooky news story as a sign that Jesus is coming soon?"

That tension is something Christians have lived with ever since Jesus died. How do we live while we're waiting for him to come back? Does the fact that he still has not come back change the way we look at our faith and our lives?

Many Christians would say no. We have to keep vigilant. We have to expect that someday we're going to walk out our front doors and Jesus is going to return and life as we know it will be over.

Others will say that since it's been almost 2000 years and Jesus has still not come back, it's no longer appropriate to take those expectations in such a literal manner. Jesus' original followers may have thought he meant he was coming back in their lifetimes. But his teaching about his return was a metaphor for his presence in the world through the church.

And there are other ways of trying to wrestle with that question. This passage in Matthew 25 would seem to indicate that we should take door A: We should live every day as though it could be our last. But specifically we should do everything we can to follow God's call on our lives because God has only given us a short amount of time to carry it out.

Jesus makes that point in Matthew 25 by telling a story which is kind of a metaphor for the way his followers should live while they wait for him to return. The imagery Jesus uses to make that point is of ten bridesmaids waiting for a groom to come and take his brides.

If you read closely you'll notice something peculiar about the story. Matthew mentions the bridesmaids and the groom. But he doesn't mention the bride. Now that seems like an odd way to talk about a wedding.

The oldest and best manuscripts we have of Matthew don't mention the bride, which is why she isn't mentioned in your bibles. But other versions of Matthew do. So it's unclear whether he left the bride out on purpose or not.

Regardless of what he meant to do, the people who heard this story for the first time would have instantly understood the metaphor of a bride and groom. The Old Testament often talks about the relationship between God and Israel as a marriage with God as the groom and Israel as the bride.

When the people of Israel started following other gods the imagery was of Israel as a wife who cheated on her husband. But God was depicted as forgiving her and taking her back despite her philandering.

So when Jesus talks about a groom and bridesmaids, everyone would have known what he meant. It's also important to keep in mind that this story doesn't seem to sound like any of the ancient Jewish wedding customs that historians know about.

So we don't want to get caught up in whether or not this is how things used to happen. It isn't. It's kind of like a parable. It teaches us religious truth using images that people were familiar with.

In this story the bridesmaids are waiting for the groom to show up. The expectation is that when he shows up everyone will head over to the wedding reception. I guess you just have to imagine the bride being part of the equation.

There are a total of ten bridesmaids. Five were wise and five were foolish. Right there when he uses the words "wise" and "foolish", you know those are code words for Matthew.

At the end of Matthew 7 he says, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man..." and "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man."

So right away we know that the five wise bridesmaids symbolize people who hear what Jesus teaches and try to follow them. The foolish bridesmaids are those who have heard his teachings but choose not to follow them.

That wisdom or foolishness is symbolized in the story by whether or not the bridesmaids were adequately prepared to wait long enough for the groom to get there. If you've ever lived in a place that has no electricity you know that you have to have lamps at night or everything will be pitch black.

But in order for your lamp to work, you have to give it enough fuel to burn. In this case the lamps burned oil. So if you have to wait a long time after dark, you need to have enough oil for the lamp to burn.

Now that doesn't sound very significant to us because we've spent most or all of our lives just flicking a switch to turn on a light. But the question of whether or not they had enough oil was a daily concern for people back then.

Five of the bridesmaids had the foresight to bring enough oil. The other five weren't prepared. And wouldn't you know it, the groom was late. So they waited and waited, watching their supply of oil get smaller and smaller.

When the five foolish ones saw that they were going to run out of oil, they asked five wise ones to share. But the wise ones said, "Hey, if we give you what we have none of us will have enough oil. Go out to the store and buy some."

So the foolish bridesmaids went out and bought some oil. But while they were gone the groom showed up. He took the five wise bridesmaids with him to the wedding reception and then locked the door behind him.

When the foolish bridesmaids saw that everyone was gone, they went over to the place where the groom was having the reception. They knocked on the door and asked to be let in. But the groom said he didn't know who they were.

Jesus concludes by saying that his followers should be vigilant just like the wise bridesmaids in the story. Now it's easy to look at a story like this and read too much into it. He simply means to say that there will be some people who take him seriously and spend every possible moment doing God's work and following Jesus' teaching.

There will be others who don't take it as seriously. For them the Christian faith will be the equivalent of some other group they belong to, whether it's a group of people with similar hobbies or a community organization. They'll participate when they can and when they want to. But it won't be their first love.

The question of whether or when Jesus comes back is secondary. What really matters is what you do with your time. So in light of what we've learned about this story so far, what does it tell us about making the greatest use of the time we have?

I think this story reminds us that it's pretty easy to get distracted from the kinds of things God really wants us to spend our time doing. Of course, what one person thinks is a distraction may be perceived as extremely important for someone else.

I think one way to know whether or not what you're doing is important is to ask yourself if what you're focusing on really makes a positive impact on the world. Are people's lives made better by what you're doing in God's name?

Does what you do make one group of people's lives appear to be better while at the same time making someone else's worse? Or are we doing something which makes us feel better about ourselves but doesn't really accomplish anything for God's kingdom?

While I was researching for this week's text I did some internet searches looking for stories to help illustrate my points. On one religion site I typed in "Wisconsin" to see what stories came up about the practice of religion in our state.

Lots of stories came up, but almost all of them had to do with two issues. The first is abortion. There were hundreds of stories about lawmakers and religious leaders making one effort after another to eradicate the practice of abortion in the state.

It's clear that our leadership is willing to sacrifice every service related to women's health if they think it means they can prevent people from doing a couple of abortions. Some of you may be aware of just how much energy in the church has been devoted to this issue. And now people out there think that's one of the few things we care about.

The other issue that kept coming up is clergy sexual abuse. One story after another involving accusations, convictions, cover ups, and the whole nine yards. With the kind of coverage it gets, people out there probably think all of us clergy are sex offenders. Because that seems to be the only other thing the church is involved with.

Part of the reason is because the church has done such a poor job of dealing with the issue head on and getting the problem resolved. Can you imagine how much of our energy in the church has been devoted to resolving these thousands of allegations?

My point is that I wonder what else we could have done with all the energy and passion that have been expended on these two issues? Can you imagine if we worked as hard on eradicating poverty as we do on outlawing abortion?

Can you imagine how much more we could do for the cause of justice in our society if we weren't forced to spend so much time and money giving justice to people who were abused by clergy?

We get caught up in all kinds of things, and this passage reminds us to stick to our mission. Jesus says we need to love our neighbor as ourselves. Are the ministries we're involved with at church really about that? Is that their main objective?

Do we confuse the things that make us feel good with the things that actually do others real good? We as a church need to always be asking ourselves that question before we end up letting our lamps burn out while we chase yet another spiritual windmill.

Back in 1985 I was big into Christian rock music, and my favorite band at the time, Petra, recorded a song called *Witch Hunt*. The lyrics kind of make my point. The chorus says, "Another Witch Hunt looking for evil wherever we can find it; off on a tangent, hope the Lord won't mind it. Another Witch Hunt, takin' a break from all our gospel labor, on a crusade but we forgot our Savior"

They were responding on that album to this religious fanaticism over rock music at the time. Everyone was trying to figure out whether or not rock music was really inspired by the devil as some people said.

We used to literally take our records and spin them backwards to see if there was some kind of satanic secret message recorded onto them. People even listened to Petra's music backwards to see if they had secretly recorded some kind of satanic message.

So on that same album Petra recorded something backwards. I can still remember using my finger to spin that record backwards on my parents' records player. But it was kind of funny. The message they recorded for all of us witch hunters was "Why are you looking for the devil when you ought to be looking for the Lord?"

Folks we have this terrible tendency to get distracted when the work God has given us to do is so incredibly important. This passage reminds us to keep filling our lamps with the oil of good, productive things that make God's kingdom more and more of a reality in our world.

We did that when we feed a room full of folks last Sunday who don't have enough to eat. That hot chili helps them see the world with a lot more hope. We have been doing it as we supported Tina through the process of ordination. In a few hours we'll have an opportunity to celebrate the culmination of Tina's faithfulness.

We do that when we take care of this building so that we can keep using it for all the different functions that bring the kingdom of God to Waukesha. This week, as you look at your pledge cards and think about what this church might accomplish on God's behalf in 2012, I want you to consider what it means to be faithful, to be vigilant.

That's our task – to be ready for whatever comes our way. Maybe it's the blessing of a new group of Baptists from far away who want to join us. Maybe it's a person whose health has declined to the point where they need us to support them during one of life's transitions.

Maybe it's someone who wants to become a minister and needs our help getting through the process. Maybe it's a young cook named Ivan who speaks another language but wants to go to a church where he feels welcomed anyway.

Whatever life throws at us, whatever God sends our way, however long it takes, let's make sure we have enough oil in our lamps. Let's make sure we're ready when the groom finally shows up.