

November 9, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Ready for a Party

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

*But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, who is a holy God. And a jealous God who will not forgive your transgressions or your sins."*

Matthew 25:1-13

*"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."*

The first reading this morning seemed to be about the importance of living with a sense of the utter holiness of God, the sacredness of life, or however you want to put it. Joshua warns the people of the seriousness of their commitment to God. Joshua is at the end of his life as Israel's leader. It is time for the people to renew their faithfulness to God. The choice is either the various gods of the surrounding cultures, or the one God, who is beyond nation and tribe, who is the Lord and Ruler of the universe. I and my family, says Joshua, have made our choice. When the people say enthusiastically that they also will serve God, Joshua bluntly responds, You CANNOT serve God. Variant translations say, You will not or may not be able to serve the Lord. It is more demanding than you think. They insist. Oh yes we can. And Joshua goes ahead with the covenant renewal.

It seemed to me that here is a dimension of the spiritual life, of truly human life, we have lost touch with and desperately need. It is the sense of awe at the power of life which we call God. It is the sense that to love and serve God asks for all that we are and have. We have settled for small and tame gods. We have made the God of the universe into a tribal god to bless our nations, our wars, our ball games, our political party or religion. We have created idols out of cultural values that are in tension with who, or what, God really is—violence, greed, self-centeredness. We have settled for spiritualities that make us feel good, that keep us focused mostly on our own salvation or enlightenment or whatever, and have lost the necessary sense of awe and responsibility that are part being interconnected with the whole of creation. With all of this, we have lost the deep humility that opens us to life and to other people, that creates in us compassion and empathy, a sense of justice and a desire for fairness. Not being in awe of our place within a vast, mysterious universe, we have lost the moral sense that we must harmonize the ways we live with the wellbeing of all people and the earth.

Joshua's words sound shocking. You cannot serve God. You may not be able to do the very

thing you say you want to do. It takes more than religious enthusiasm or good spiritual vibes. It takes a willingness not only to receive the deep joy of finding our spiritual home in our relationship with God, but also to embrace the ultimate mystery and power that is at the heart of the universe. It is as though Joshua says, You are playing with something bigger and more powerful than you realize. Yes, God has been with you through many struggles and challenges, through Egypt and the wilderness, and has brought you to your own land. This is also the Lord of the universe, and living in disharmony with God's purposes will bring disaster.

We don't like the biblical phrase "the fear of God" because we don't understand it. It is about that sense of awe which is crucial to our living fully and responsibly as part of the wide and vast creation. We have this sense, this feeling, at times when we are in certain places. When I am at the ocean, looking out on the wide expanse of sea, I become aware of how small my life is, both in time and space. I am like a grain of sand on the shore. In such moments, I perceive so much of what I think, engage in, and value as being what the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes called "vanity", that is, emptiness. It is the kind of awareness that matures our spirits, minds, and hearts.

The recent scientific report from the United Nations tells us that we are on an irreversible track with regard to damage to the environment and global warming. Many simply continue to choose not to believe it. Today there is an epidemic of the view that reality is what you want it to be, not what it really is. We are facing the possibility, and some would say certainty, that human life on this planet will come to an end. That is a very hard word to hear. It carries the same sense of the words of Joshua, that when we do not live harmoniously with the ways of God's creation, it will mean disaster for us.

As I thought about this, I remembered a similar place in religious literature. It is in the Bhagavad Gita, the epic spiritual poem/story of India. The Gita was the scripture most treasured by Gandhi. In the story, Arjuna is in a chariot, driven by Krishna, who is, as it ends up, the Lord incarnate. The chariot is drawn up between two clans ready for battle. Arjuna is soul-sick at the impending killing. He is struggling to know what to do and how to do it. The dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna escalates toward greater and greater revelation of truth. Arjuna finally asks for a direct vision of Reality, of God. Krishna gives it to him, and Arjuna is dazed by this vision of "the measureless, massive, sun-flame splendor of God's radiant form." And then come these words: "I am death, shatterer of worlds, annihilating all things." These words were quoted by Robert J. Oppenheimer when he witnessed the first atomic explosion at Alamogordo in July 1945. Humanity had arrogantly believed it could master the very power of the universe. Doing so brought death and destruction. That is what living without awe, without the "fear of God", brings about.

Maybe this is something we in our community need to reflect on. When we make a

commitment to membership, to work with a few spiritual disciplines to awaken, deepen, and give direction to our lives of faith, are we not also opening ourselves to the vastness, the ultimate mystery, and the inconceivable power of the reality we call God? Yes, God is near us, in everything and every person, throughout the creation. And yet this very God who is so near us in the intimacy of divine love is also the God of the universe, the power of life and of death. Spiritual enthusiasm is not enough. Do we not also need to wrestle with Joshua's warning and what it means? You cannot, may not be able to, serve God, the holiness that is far greater than you know. Awe. Mystery. Wonder. These things are integral to a humble, servant-minded, loving, and responsible life of faith.

Turning to our reading from the Gospel of Matthew. This is the first of three parables about the so-called "coming of the Son of Man". These, also, are teachings about ultimate things, what finally matters. The early Christian community expected Jesus' immediate triumphal return to establish once and for all God's reign upon the earth. Their expectations were disappointed. Through the centuries there have been those who insisted on such a literal "second coming" of Christ. Each movement has been fervent in its conviction that "now is the day and the hour," and all have been wrong. Does this mean that these teachings and stories have no value for us? Not at all. I think of these as the "parables" and "dark sayings of old" mentioned in Psalm 78. It has to do with the deepest mystery of God and God's will for the life of the world, and how we are to live in light of that mystery.

Jesus says two things. First, God's reign of justice, compassion, and love is the final word. Nothing can ultimately stand in its way. Second, however, no one can know the times and seasons, WHEN it will completely unfold. We are called to live as those already living God's reign over all of life, to wake up from sleep, to be spiritually alert at all times. These are central themes in Christian spirituality throughout the ages. In fact, the call to spiritual alertness and preparation is part of most spiritual traditions. The sense of it is this: God's reign in the world is happening all the time, here and now. But we are spiritually numb, asleep, and do not see it. Our spiritual work is to wake up.

Ten young girls take their oil lamps and go out to wait for the bridegroom to arrive. The lamps are not so much to see in the darkness as to enhance the celebration. If the lamps were to burn out, it would be a social embarrassment. The ten girls fall asleep while waiting, but wake up when the word comes that the bridegroom is near. Five of them don't have enough oil. They appeal to those who brought extra oil, but are rebuffed. If we share our oil with you, there won't be enough for us all. Go to town and buy yourselves some oil. While they go off to town, the bridegroom arrives, the wedding banquet starts up, the other five go in, and the doors close. When the girls come back, they are unable to get into the wedding festivities. Because they were

not prepared, they miss the very thing they were waiting for so anxiously.

Why couldn't the five prepared girls share just a little of their oil? Why couldn't the doorkeeper let the girls slip on in, late as they were? What would that hurt? Well, the parable is concerned about something else, something more important. The upshot seems to be that each is responsible for her or his own readiness. We are to bring our own oil. And what might that oil be? I think for us here in the Church of the Covenant, it means our own spiritual life, taking responsibility for our own lives of faith. Gordon Cosby, Bev's brother, came back from chaplaincy in World War II troubled by what he experienced. He attended to soldiers who came to their deaths without a real sense of God. He saw this as a crisis for the church, that there needed to be a new emphasis on personal experience and responsibility with regard to the life of faith. This was how the emphasis on working with spiritual practices or disciplines became part of the Church of the Saviour and the Church of the Covenant. It is so that what we TALK about becomes real in our lives.

We have to bring our own oil. The spiritual life is not something we can borrow from someone else. It has to be our own. The spiritual life is about waking up to our own life in relationship to God, to the world, to others, to ourselves. It is about embracing our own strengths and weaknesses, our wounds and our wholeness. It is about knowing ourselves created and loved by God, and what God has gifted and called us to be and do with our lives. I would put it this way—we need to know that we HAVE our own oil, and then work with how to BRING it.

Over the years, I have been with many people facing some crisis or another. The death of a loved one. A severe illness. Emotional or mental distress. Broken relationships. Or simply the changing phases of our lives. Basically there seem to be two kinds of responses. There are those who have nothing to fall back on, nothing to call upon spiritually at such times. Their participation in the church has been superficial, content with a kind of second-hand religious exposure. There has been little or no attention to prayer, to study, to reflection at a deeper level on their own lives. So when the crisis comes, they are like the five girls who brought no extra oil with them. Then there are those who have worked at some level with their own spiritual lives. Maybe their spiritual practice has been spotty or kind of a formality. And yet when difficulties come, they at least know where to go, where to look. For some, the challenges of life bring bitterness, anger, fear. For others, they become the gateway to a deeper, richer, wiser life. It has to do with preparation, with bringing our own oil.

Finally, however, we need to recognize that this parable is not about preparing for the worst, but for the best, for a party, a celebration, a marriage festival! Jesus begins the parable by saying that the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, or God's coming reign over life, is like young girls expectantly awaiting the wedding celebration. Jesus compares God's reign in life as a

great big party. It's something you don't want to miss out on. Spiritual alertness, keeping awake, being prepared, having a sense of awe ... this is all so that we really notice what is going on, so that we join the party. There is a sacred dimension to life, all around us and within us, even in the difficult experiences. The spiritual life, bringing our own oil, is so that we don't miss it.