

What's the Best that Could Happen?

Jesus's Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids has never been one of my favorites. As Lutheran pastor and missionary Elisabeth Johnson points out, there's precious little grace in this story. It was customary in Jesus's time for a bridegroom to walk his bride from her parents' house to the wedding venue. The bridesmaids would carry oil lamps to light the happy couple's path. But in this parable, the bridegroom is delayed. The bridesmaids doze off waiting for him, leaving their lamps alight. The lamps run dry, and the "wise" bridesmaids won't share their extra oil with the "foolish" ones. So, the "foolish" bridesmaids have to find a dealer to sell them more oil in the middle of the night. By the time they succeed, the wedding is in full swing, the door has been closed, and they're excluded from the celebration.

Our translation of this story is better than some, in that it translates the Greek term Jesus uses, *parthenoi* (παρθενος), as "bridesmaids" instead of "maidens" or "virgins." A *parthenos* was an unmarried girl who lived with her parents. *Parthenoi* isn't a direct comment on the bridesmaids' virtue, but the word still smacks of patriarchal judgment to me. And it tells me these girls were young, twelve years old at most. If this was real life, the "wise" bridesmaids probably wouldn't have been wise at all; they just would have been lucky enough to have mothers who remembered to send them off with extra oil. And I'm troubled by the image of five little girls scurrying around late at night, frantically trying to buy extra oil, only to be rebuked by the bridegroom and have the door to the wedding slammed in their faces. Where's the grace in that?

The commentaries on this parable aren't especially helpful. Some blame the bridesmaids for falling asleep, while others criticize the "foolish" ones for running off in search of oil when they should have been waiting for the bridegroom. Most of them treat this parable as a thinly veiled threat. They seem to think Jesus is playing gotcha games, delaying his return long enough

to catch us off guard so he can bar us from the Kingdom. Be prepared, the commentators warn. Never let your guard down for an instant, or you might miss your one and only opportunity to avoid the eternal flames. Sorry, but that doesn't sound like the Savior I know and love.

We can wonder why Jesus tells this parable at all. In the previous chapter, our Lord has already described a thief breaking into a home at an unexpected hour, and a servant caught in the act by his master as he beat up his fellow servants and guzzled the wine. Why do we need this story about wise and foolish little girls? This may just be a case of Jesus telling multiple parables to illustrate a point. He did that in Luke's Gospel with the parables of the lost sheep, the missing coin, and the prodigal son. But perhaps he told this particular story to make his listeners, and us, think about what being prepared means and what we should be preparing for.

In modern America, being prepared usually means bracing for the worst that could happen. There's a whole subculture of "preppers" out there who cram their homes with mountains of canned goods, bottled water, paper goods, guns, ammunition, and medical supplies in anticipation of a doomsday that may never come. To offer a less dramatic example, I was recently recruited to help with Bishop Sutton's final Eucharist at Diocesan Convention. Not knowing how many people would be there or what supplies the Claggett Center would have on hand, I ended up bringing about twice as much wine as we needed, along with hundreds of extra wafers, candles, vessels, linens, and the like. Short of dragging in an understudy for Bishop Sutton himself – a role Bishop Carrie could presumably have stepped in to fill – I brought every last thing I could think of that we could possibly need. My car was packed to the roof. If anything went wrong, I wanted to be *prepared*, by God.

The service went off without a hitch, of course. Thanks to our delegates, Anne and Dan, we had everything unpacked and the altar set up over an hour ahead of the service. We had more

than enough of everything, and it was with great pride that we watched Bishop Sutton celebrate the Eucharist at an altar decked out with St. Luke's hangings, candlesticks, and flowers, standing under our cross and elevating our chalice and paten. St. Luke's answered the call, friends! But this experience got me thinking about what all that preparation was for.

Jesus's parables of the thief in the night and the drunken servant are about things going wrong unexpectedly. But the bridesmaids in this parable weren't caught out by a disaster. They were invited to a wedding. There was no reason for them to expect anything to go wrong, much less for them to pack everything they might conceivably need if something did. And Jesus doesn't suggest that they should have come to the wedding laden down with tons of extra luggage. The only thing the "foolish" bridesmaids failed to bring was a little extra oil. What did Jesus mean that oil to represent?

Commentators typically argue that the lamps in this parable represent faith, and the oil represents service. The "wise" bridesmaids are Christians whose strong faith inspires good works, while the "foolish" ones are Christians whose faith is weak or who don't do enough good works to earn their way into the Kingdom. It's all pretty harsh. But, as Thomas Aquinas reports, St. Augustine had a different interpretation. Augustine agreed that the lamps in this parable represent faith, but he thought the oil represents joy. That makes perfect sense to me.

Focusing on everything that could possibly go wrong inflates anxiety and makes joy disappear. It was an honor to help with the Convention Eucharist, but all that planning, gathering, packing, and hauling was very stressful. I was so busy trying to prevent the worst that I mostly forgot to look forward to the best. The Eucharist isn't a grim ritual that we're obliged to perform under threat of hellfire and damnation. It's a lovely celebration where we gather in Christ's presence to remember his life and give thanks for his love and sacrifice. In Bishop Sutton's

skilled, faithful hands, the service turned out beautifully. But it would have been just as beautiful without my endless planning and overpacking. Honestly, the only way it could have been any better is if I had stopped fretting and just let myself enjoy getting ready for it.

At a time when war rages in the Middle East, when antisemitism and Islamophobia are rampant at home and it feels as though disaster might befall us at any moment, joyful anticipation can seem foolish indeed. But faith is nothing if not trust that, as St. Julian of Norwich famously said, “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” by the grace of God. As Jesus’s followers, we’re called to let our faith produce joy by the bucketful, lighting up a dark and frightened world that’s in desperate need of hope. The question we should be asking is not “what could possibly go wrong,” but “what’s the best that could happen?” If we cheerfully prepare for the best and trust in God’s grace, we can light up the world with our joy. And when we do, the doors of the Kingdom will swing wide open and we can all go in to celebrate together. Amen.