

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Matthew 25:1-13

25¹Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹²But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Oil Reserves

I'm reluctant to preach on this thing called the apocalypse for two reasons. First, the scriptural passages that deal with the apocalypse were written nearly two thousand years ago using language and imagery that would resonate with an audience two thousand years ago but leaves a contemporary audience puzzling over those images. Second, quite a few crazies through the ages have claimed to have some special dialogue with God or some new insight into scripture that tells them when everything is gonna fall apart, and those crazies have attracted crazies who buy into those predictions, proclaim them to skeptical world, and eventually go off into cave or onto a mountain with their minions and wait for the big moment to arrive, only to discover that God is once again late for this appointment.

In all fairness these crazies have found plenty of support for their beliefs in scripture precisely because Paul believed that Jesus was coming back very soon. We see that in today's Epistle lesson. Jesus was expected to make a grand appearance at any time and save his suffering church. The Thessalonians were expecting Jesus to come in their own lifetime, so when people in the church who had expected Jesus' grand appearance died before he showed up, it raised some questions among those still living. Many were probably disillusioned, thinking that the whole message was a crock; Paul was crying wolf. What's worse is that they were facing persecution from the locals because of their beliefs. Was it really worth it to endure suffering over something that may or may not be true?

It seems to me rather likely that Paul changed his message as time passed; as years went by with no Jesus in sight, he began to write more about church organization and decorum, about how Christians were to act toward others *outside* the church, about how to sustain the church on earth for a longer period of time, and when Paul was finally led off to be executed, Jesus did not miraculously intervene and free Paul from his captors or his executioners. And so it stands to Paul's credit that he was able to change his own expectations without compromising his commitment to Christ, without throwing in the towel, without giving up on his hope that Christ would indeed return someday if not in his own lifetime. And it stands to the credit of many who followed Paul that they were able to keep the faith despite hardship and persecution.

It's hard for many people to maintain zeal and devotion to Christ when the world seems to be crashing in around them and there's no end in sight. On

one of my first days in the army, I sat in a large classroom with a few hundred other recruits filling out paperwork, and one of the forms required us to designate a beneficiary, someone who would receive a death benefit from the government in the event of our demise – we were, after all, in a dangerous profession. One drill instructor asking how many of us young lads had a girlfriend back home who we planned to name as our beneficiary. A number of recruits raised their hands, and the instructor said, “Don’t do it.” He said, “Give it all to your mom,” because experience had taught him that many of those girlfriends would, in the course of a few months or years, be writing what has come to be known as a “Dear John” letter to their distant boyfriends, explaining in a very gentle and loving way, how they have fallen in love with someone else. I’m sure that young women joining the army were also warned of the “Dear Jane” letters that many of them would no doubt receive. My point is that many people are not very good at waiting for the one they love. Many a person has abandoned faith in difficult times; how many of us have had our faith tested when we pray for those we love who are suffering, especially when the ones who are suffering are really good people? When we see the suffering continue and end in death, we feel that God has been absent at best, uncaring at worst, and if the suffering imposed on us is a result of our beliefs, would we continue to believe?

This begs the question, “What did Paul find so special about Christ that he could maintain that level of faith despite the disappointment of not seeing him sooner than later, despite the suffering he endured for proclaiming his faith?” And if you read the majority of what Paul wrote you see that he was assured of his own salvation from all the forces that try to pull us away from God. God, in his love, had sent Jesus to deliver us from sin and death. THAT’S A LOT! God takes away everything bad and gives everything good, starting with the individual. Paul could see as well as anyone that Jesus’ coming didn’t make everything in the world suddenly good, but it made everything in Paul suddenly good, suddenly forgiven, suddenly saved, and Paul was given the assurance that someday the whole world would follow suit. Even though there’s still a lot of bad in the world, and people do bad things, we know that someday God’s good will overcome all that is bad, all that is evil. That ‘someday’ didn’t come as quickly as Paul had wanted, but it was going to come ‘someday.’

What has always empowered the church is that communion of saints who have, like Paul, experienced the glory of Jesus Christ in their own lives to the degree that they can not only sustain faith for their entire lives but also *transmit that faith*, willfully, earnestly, zealously so that others may share the joy of salvation, people like the five wise bridesmaids who we read about in today's gospel lesson. It was the duty of a bridesmaid according to first century Jewish custom, to accompany the groom on his way to meet the new bride. The maids had lamps for two reasons; one was (of course) to light the way in the dark, but the other was to illuminate the groom who would be quite dapper, wearing fine garments and all the accessories, and looking his absolute best for this once-in-a-lifetime event. And so the most important function of the bridesmaid was to illuminate the groom in all his glory, just as we, the church, are to illuminate Jesus to the best of our ability. In a culture where so many are bent on self-glorification, self-illumination, and self-promotion, we, as Christians are commissioned to glorify and illuminate and promote Jesus Christ through our words and our deeds for as long our lives permit us to do so. Some people think of church as a way to self-improvement, but they miss the point; the Church does not exist to promote a code of conduct, the church exists to promote a person, namely Jesus Christ. A few weeks ago some of us went to visit Mildred Ekstrand on her ninety-fifth birthday, and one thing that is amazing about Mildred is that she has not tired in glorifying Jesus Christ. She realizes that she can't peel apples and slice turkeys for the Cranberry Festival, but she can still pray, and she called us on Thursday to say that she was thinking about us and wanted to encourage us; that's Mildred's ministry at age 95, and she does her best at it. That's ministry. That's illuminating Christ in whatever way possible. Mildred has brought extra oil for her lamp so that she can keep it lit for her entire life as she waits to meet her Lord Jesus.

What about us? Do we have oil in our lamps? Are we illuminating Christ so that the world can see him in all his splendor? Do we know him to the point where we even desire to illuminate him for our entire lives, despite the trials and tribulations that come our way? It's hard to be zealous for something or someone you don't know much about; that's why I encourage you to study scripture, to learn of God's amazing love and grace and forgiveness so you want to illuminate Christ in everything you say and do and think. And to illuminate Christ, you need to have enough oil to get you through those rough times and all the temptations to glorify self.

I've met too many people who regret not bringing enough oil. Usually they are people who are at the end of their life who have so many regrets about what they should have done; they should have loved their wives more than they did, spent more time with their children, given more of their time or money to those who didn't have enough. They should have apologized to some they hurt and forgiven those who hurt them. All this would have, should have, could have been done if they had illuminated Christ through those many dark years, if they had followed his commandments of loving God and loving others, of repenting and forgiving. But they figured they'd have time to do that later, only to realize that their time was running out.

What's the take home? Fill your flasks with oil, because you may need it. You don't know how long your life will be, and what challenges you will face down the road. It's easy to praise God and illuminate Christ when all is going well for you, but what about those dark times? What about all those unforeseen disasters that leave you feeling God forsaken. Can you keep watch? Can you have faith the bridegroom is still coming? Can you keep singing praises and not revert to singing the Blues?