

Living in the “Great Meantime”

A sermon by the Rev. Robert Bruce Edson in St. John’s Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on November 9, 2008, the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost.

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. Amos 5:24

The prophet Amos was a shepherd and itinerate farmer from the town of Tekoa in Judea, only six miles south of Jesus' own birthplace in Bethlehem. Though he is about as far removed from the religious establishment as he could be, Amos is close enough to the heart of God and to the events of his time to be a prophet and spokesman for God. He is concerned that people were trying to get by with the minimum of religious commitment. He is concerned that they wanted spiritual benefits for the least cost and obligation, thereby trivializing their relationship with God. While God’s grace is free, it is never cheap. Amos knows that God isn’t interested in a show of piety by performing animal sacrifices and beautiful music. He knows that what God wants is for “justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

Where Amos sees God's coming as darkness and gloom, St. Paul sees it as light and joy. The difference is that Paul is writing out of the power of the resurrection and the need to be alert for Christ’s return.

In his parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, Jesus tells us that entering God’s realm is like being invited to a wedding party for which we must be prepared and ready at a moment's notice. In ancient times, when a man and a woman were married, the groom brought his bride home and the whole community would gather for the celebration that went on for several nights. The bride's attendants were expected to bring the needed supplies that included extra oil for the lamps. In this parable, there are ten bridesmaids, five of whom are wise enough to have thought ahead to bring extra oil for the lamps. The other five who neglect to bring the extra oil have to leave the celebration to go buy more. While they are out, the door is shut behind them and they are left on the outside looking in.

The bridegroom in this story represents Christ and the bride is the church for whom he is willing to give his life. While most first century Christians believed that Christ's return would be in their life time, the delay of the bridegroom in this story tells us that Christ's return will be later than anticipated. The oil represents the justice and righteousness with which we are to live during the “great meantime” until his return. Because we cannot know the time or the place of Christ's coming and because it will never be found on our calendars, we must be prepared at all times. In the meantime, we live our lives in a state of preparedness and readiness for his coming at a time when we least expect it.

To be sure, all ten bridesmaids have their lamps burning at the beginning and appear to be prepared. Only five are wise enough to have thought ahead to be prepared with extra oil to be used during the delay. The other five foolishly did not to plan ahead to make provision for the unexpected. When a serious storm is predicted and there is a greater demand for essentials in the stores, the wise are always prepared and ready for the unexpected.

The lamps in this story represent our sincerity of faith and the values by which we live. All that we do in our worship, Christian formation and outreach require the light of Christ to inspire and direct us. The Holy Spirit is the light who shows us the way.

The closed door in this story represents our lost opportunities to witness to Christ. How often we think of what we wish we had said or done after the fact! Once lost, those opportunities

are gone forever. As long as we know and practice the power of forgiveness and reconciliation, the door remains open for us.

We are rarely completely ready for anything in life. We are never sure if we are ready for an exam in school, for a new job, to get married, to start a family, or how to think through decisions that determine our future. We feel anxious about competing in sports, being in a job interview, and speaking before an audience. We can only do our best, yet even our best efforts are less than adequate. Because God redeems and makes worthy our meager attempts and offerings, we are often better off than we think.

The point is to be ready both to receive and reflect Christ into our lives at any time. He appears in our midst at crucial times and asks us to witness to him at key times. When we see injustice and cruelty, when we see people being dehumanized, when we see bigotry and intolerance towards those who are different from us and stand against it, we are witnessing to Christ's presence. We must be ready at a moment's notice and act without hesitation to right a wrong and take a stand for justice and righteousness. If we hesitate and do nothing, we give the impression that we are going along with the injustice and oppression. Whether or not we are ready to witness to Christ and make way for him to return in our midst depends upon our own inner resolve in our own spiritual journey.

Awaken each day with the resolve to stand against all that is hateful, wrong and unloving and stand for all that is good and right and loving. It is all about treating people with respect and doing what we can to defend and uphold them rather than to allow them to be put down. It's all about never taking anyone or anything for granted. God never does.

While we do not know the time or place or in what form Christ may come again, we do know that we must not get in the way of making him known wherever we are.

The church is a training ground for all of us to make Christ known wherever we are. Our support of the work of Christ in our time and place is how we light the way for Christ to be known and experienced. Each and every one of us is being counted on to support the work of the church, beginning here in Franklin to make this parish healthy, growing and viable gospel-centered, witnessing to Christ wherever we are.

All our worship, all our teaching and learning, all of our reaching out to others carries a cost. With your support, we can and will "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."