

Sermon for Proper 27 (Year A) – November 12, 2023
Preached at Saint Aidan’s Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon
Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; I Thess. 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

“Be prepared” is the Boy Scout motto. The English soldier who founded the Boy Scouts published the motto “Be Prepared” in his 1908 handbook, *Scouting for Boys*. He wrote that to be prepared meant “You are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty.” Even though it was many, many years ago, I remember that I really enjoyed my time as a Boy Scout.

For me, scouting was an opportunity to learn about nature, and to live in the “great outdoors,” hiking and camping. The scouting motto referred to many things: be prepared for emergencies (and so we learned first aid); be prepared to make do with what you have at hand (and so we learned how to tie knots and start fires, to build shelters and live in the wilderness).

If we were to look for a simple phrase that would sum up our readings this morning, I don’t think we could come up with a better one than the Boy Scout motto: “Be prepared.” That’s a theme that often emerges on these Sundays leading into and through the Season of Advent. We’ve finally arrived at that time in the church year when we focus on God’s coming to us, not only as the new-born infant in a manger at Bethlehem, but also as Lord of the whole creation, the one who we believe will judge the living and the dead.

Be prepared! Be prepared for God's coming! What images do these words raise in your mind? In our first reading today we heard from the prophet Amos who saw the day of the Lord's coming as one of darkness and gloom. He believed God's coming would bring to light the injustice and hypocrisy of God's people. But Paul describes God's coming as a day of glory when the Lord will gather together the faithful, both the living and the dead, to the accompaniment of God's trumpet and the archangel's call.

There is obviously a real tension between these two images. On the one hand the coming of the Lord is pictured as darkness, while on the other hand, it is to be light. So will it be gloom, or will it be glory? This tension also under-girds the story in this morning's gospel: the parable of the wise and foolish maidens.

In the story that Jesus told, five of the maidens have come prepared with extra oil for their lamps; five have not. The bridegroom is delayed and the lamps burn out. When he does arrive, the five who didn't bring any extra oil need to leave to go and buy some. In the meantime, the procession goes to the bridegroom's house and the door is shut. When the five foolish maidens arrive, they are refused entrance. The bridegroom tells them, "I do not know you."

In both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, we find many passages that underscore and illuminate Jesus' story of the wedding feast. These religious stories of a great feast are frequently used to illustrate the kingdom of God. The one who hosts the feast, of course, is God. In this morning's parable it is not clear whether Jesus intends the bridegroom to refer to God or to himself. But it *is* clear that the maidens represent us – all those who say that they want to be a part of the community of faith longing to meet God.

Be prepared! So what does it mean to be prepared to meet God? What does it mean to be reading for the coming of the Lord? First of all, let me suggest what it does **not** mean. It does not mean being terrified of God, of constantly living with the fear that we are going to be condemned as “not worth.” To be a Christian does not mean acting pious and good, when deep down we think that we are not. Take note that such an attitude is the very hypocrisy which Amos condemns.

To be prepared to meet God means to live out of the conviction that although we are sinners, we are sinners who have been redeemed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Christ, our sins have been forgiven! God has done for us what we could not do ourselves. God does not demand that we be good or perfect in order to be welcomed into God's presence. Rather, we are invited to enter into relationship with God by God's grace. God is not interested in people who *act* righteously. What God wants are righteous hearts, hearts that are prepared, hearts that are open and wait eagerly for the coming of God.

Our salvation does not depend on our being good. Quite simply, our salvation depends upon our relationship with God, a relationship that God has created, a relationship that God continues to sustain and make possible. Remember, those who are refused entrance to the wedding feast are not those who have fallen asleep, but rather those who do not know and are not known by God.

The dreadful sentence, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you,” is simply the truth of their condition. He does not say, “I never called you.” He does not say, “I never loved you.” He does not say, “I never drew you to myself.” He only says, “I never knew you—because you never bothered to know me.” It appears that the door is shut to those who have not really attended to their relationship with God.

Every Sunday we join together in the Eucharist. This sharing in table fellowship with fellow believers calls to mind the great king’s banquet. It is a celebration of our continuing faith in and our dependence on our relationship with God. Here we remember that Christ died for our sins and “put us right” with God. Here we remember that Christ is risen and that our relationship with him has become a present reality. Here we proclaim that he will come again and with Paul look forward with hope to the fulfillment of our faith. Here, in this sacred meal, we have a foretaste of the wedding feast that God has prepared for us. Pray for God’s coming into our lives, but also remember to remain strong in your faith: “Be prepared!”