

**November 6, 2011: CELEBRATING WHAT GOD IS DOING**

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13; Psalm 78:1-7**

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Pedal Pilgrim, Brian Heron, tells of meeting a woman last summer on his bicycle pilgrimage who was raised Catholic. She converted to Islam because she admired the practices Islam requires of its adherents. You may be familiar with the Five Pillars of Islam—read scripture (the Koran), fast, give to the poor, pray 5 times a day, and make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Those were the practices missing from her faith upbringing, she said, the structure she wanted for her life. Brian didn't tell her that the Christian faith teaches its adherents read scripture (the Bible), fast, give to the poor, and pray five times a day. It's true that Christians don't require pilgrimage to a specific location, but we do encourage a pilgrimage of self-knowledge. I guess it's all in how you look at it.

I mention this, because the lectionary texts this time of each year are all "Be prepared!" Other than Boy Scouts, the only group I know still hyped about "be prepared" these days is the local emergency response department, warning of "The Big One" coming. They mean earthquakes; scripture means the return of Jesus. Not "Jesus is coming; look busy." Matthew and Paul say, "Jesus is coming; be prepared." Lake Oswego had a "Be Prepared" expo this weekend that featured winter emergency kits for cars, neighborhood disaster planning, ham radios, and water purification systems. Neither Matthew nor Paul means that kind of "be prepared."

They make an imperative statement—do *this!*—which makes me wonder "What?" Boy Scouts practice preparedness skills. Emergency departments have lists of what to carry for winter travel. Paul tells the church in Thessalonika, "hope."

If only the so-called "wise" bridesmaids had heard that message. My mother would not have approved of their "Sink or swim on your own" attitude toward the foolish bridesmaids. Why wouldn't they at least share their lamp oil? If they were so "wise," why didn't they tell the others to check their supply earlier? You'd think that would be a rudimentary faith practice, consideration of others. When we make our offering on Sunday morning, we're *practicing* our faith by sharing. That old warhorse, the Old Testament tithe, is a gift *to God*, a faith practice, not dues we pay. Yes, your tithe pays religious professionals. Yes, your tithe provides for our building and programs. Yes, your tithe supports the mission of our denomination and presbytery. Yes, your tithe feeds hungry people in our community and supports a mission partner in Central Asia. Yes, your tithe benefits this church. But it's a gift from you to *God*, not the church.

The reason giving is a faith *practice*, is because it helps us set priorities. It's all gift. You know that. There is nothing we create for ourselves—from the air we breathe, to the bodies that carry us around, to the work we do to earn a living. It's all gift. God knows, if we got to keep 100% of everything we're given, without considering the source, it would only be a matter of time before we thought it was about us, rather than the Giver. Originally the tithe supported the Levites, who had no means of support. Now your gifts support an institution that many believe is dying, but right now this institution is what we've got. It carries our collective memory, which many still believe offers shortcuts to the answers to life's persistent questions. This institution is still a place to go to acknowledge there is something greater than ourselves. It supports us in our need and feeds us to go out and serve others. Think of the Church as the "oil dealer" to which the less-prepared bridesmaids are sent.

It would be pretty sad to get to the end of our lives and discover all we've done is to consume all we've been given. If it comes to that, we will have shut the door on life as completely as the bridegroom's door is shut in the parable. We have a higher purpose than to merely use up our lives. I wonder if we've been reading this parable all wrong. People usually think Jesus is the bridegroom,

shutting us out of the kingdom. What if it's not that *Jesus* doesn't recognize *us*? What if it is *we* who have shut the door and don't recognize *him*? The apostle Paul portrays the return of Jesus as both "now" and "not yet." Maybe Jesus has come and is coming thousands of times each day. In the chances we're offered to be compassionate and respectful toward others, in the ways we live justly, in the honorable way we do our work, in our forgiveness of injury, in our ability to disagree and still hold our opponents in love, in our desire to glorify God in all things. This is Torah living, what the prophets have told us all along to do in order to "be prepared"—perhaps what the wise (prepared) bridesmaids knew to do. Jesus is coming . . . be prepared.

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