

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
19 March 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Don’t Be Fooled”***

Fourth in the Lenten Series, *Courage & Kin-dom* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

### ***Matthew 25:1-13***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

As I heard one preacher say recently, if you are one of the five “foolish” young women, this parable sounds like a bad anxiety dream – the kind you wake up from in a panic.<sup>1</sup> Let’s just imagine it this way for a moment:

You’re an aspiring actor – waiting for your big break, and you’ve been waiting for this big break a really, really long time. You’re on your way home from filming yet another commercial, waiting at the airport for a delayed flight, and you get a call from your agent saying that director and producer Steven Spielberg is interested in casting *you* in his next film. He’s supposed to call you in the next couple of hours so “*stay by your phone.*” “*Got it,*” you say.

You turn up your volume to make sure you don’t miss the call, and you wait for so long that you fall asleep at your

terminal. You wake up to the *blrrrp* of your agent texting you: “*Get ready, just talked to his assistant; he’s calling soon.*”

“*Awesome,*” you text back. “*I’m ready.*” But as you swipe up from the text you notice the dreaded red battery symbol in the corner. You’ve got less than 10% power left. You reach into your bag for your charger and realize that you left your charger in your hotel room. No!!!

You frantically look around and see some people with chargers, but they have Androids and you have an i-Phone. You finally find some people with i-Phones. You ask each one if you can borrow one of their chargers, but no one shares. Everyone either ignores you or just shrugs and says, “*Sorry, I need my charger, my flight is leaving soon.*”

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Listening to Snakes and Bridesmaids,” *The Corners* (Feb. 26, 2023), accessed on 18 March 2023 at

<https://thecorners.substack.com/p/listening-to-snakes-and-bridesmaids>.

Someone finally looks at you with sympathy and says, *“I think I saw a store in the terminal that sells chargers.”*

*“Right. Of course.”* So off you go, checking your battery; it’s down to 7% now. It’s a race against the clock.

You find the airport directory, locate an electronics store and you do that awkward “speedwalk through the airport thing – you know with all your bags flailing behind you” as you hustle all the way to the equivalent of the Airport Radioshack.

After frantically looking through the products you realize they are sold out of the charger you need. They have the i-phone 10.3.24.76 charger but you have an i-phone 10.3.24.79; they aren’t compatible. (You silently curse Apple for always upgrading their chargers so you have to constantly buy new chargers and nothing is compatible.)

You desperately ask the guy behind the counter who says he’s going on his break and can’t help you, but there’s an electronics kiosk vending machine thing between the women’s restroom and

McDonalds, and so you run there. You get to the kiosk vending machine – and yes! You see what you need. You look down at your phone; 4%.

You put in your credit card. Push A12 to get your charger. The metal circle thing starts to turn and then...*NO!* The charger jams in the turnstile. (This is when the dream really becomes a nightmare, right? The only thing that would make it worse is if you were naked or your teeth were falling out or some other horrific recurring thing that happens in dreams.)

The charger is completely stuck. You look around for help – but nothing. People are just whizzing by you on their cell phones of course – like rubbing salt in a wound. You see a number on the machine for ‘customer service’ and you call it but get put on hold. Precious battery power depleting by the second.

Your phone goes black. Battery dead. Frustrated, you kick the machine and turn your back against it and sink to the ground.

But then you hear a quiet ‘thud.’

You turn and look. It’s a miracle! The charger is

dislodged (thanks to your kick of frustration...and...*Thanks be to God!*)

You grab the charger, trying to tear it out of that awful plastic clamshell thing that encapsulate all electronics and that take scissors to open (scissors you don't have because, you know, you're in an airport and have been through security)...but adrenaline helps you get it open with your teeth and nails. You run to an outlet to begin charging your phone. You wait. And wait. It finally gets enough juice to turn on, and you see you have a missed call from a number you don't recognize.

You immediately call the number back. "*Stephen Spielberg here.*" You begin to explain the situation but before you even finish your apology, he says, "*I'm sorry, who are you? You've got the wrong number,*" and (click); he hangs up.

You redial, but this time – in typical bad dream fashion – things just get worse. You get that *be-de-deep* sound... "*I'm sorry, this number is no longer in service.*" *What?* You

eventually wake up from your nightmare panic dream in a nervous sweat just as your future flashes before you. Opportunity of a lifetime gone. You are a no name actor the rest of your life – playing extras in commercials that run in the middle of the night during infomercials.

So yeah, stay alert. The kingdom of God is like THAT.<sup>2</sup>

*What??!!*

I mean, I know my modern example was a tad dramatic, but "come on!" Where is the Good News in this God-awful story? What kind of faith do we follow that leaves us plum out of luck just because we forgot to bring extra oil or left our cell phone charger in the hotel? If anything, these young women are the ones who need to catch a break! Not have a door slammed in their face!

Lord have mercy.

You see, "the ancient Jewish [wedding] custom was that a groom and his attendants would come to the home of the bride's parents and take the bride along

<sup>2</sup> This whole opening illustration is inspired by Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber's opening illustration about Dolly Parton at the airport. Read that here: Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Listening to Snakes and Bridesmaids," *The*

*Corners* (Feb. 26, 2023), accessed on 18 March 2023 at <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/listening-to-snakes-and-bridesmaids>.

with her attendants in a bridal procession back to his parents' home, where the wedding celebration would begin. [Of course in our story today], the bridegroom is late — very late, in fact — *so* late that all ten of the bridesmaids become drowsy and fall asleep...Finally, at midnight, the groom shows up. It is time for the bridesmaids to trim their lamps and go out to meet the him. Five of them have brought extra oil for their lamps, but the other five have not, and their lamps are going out. The five so-called 'wise' bridesmaids who have extra oil refuse to share with the five who do not. Instead, they tell them to go to the dealers and buy some oil for themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

It's midnight, mind you. There are no 24 hour gas stations or 7/11s around back then. Good luck finding anything open in the middle of the night – oh and yeah, in the dark without light since your lamps are going out!

Nevertheless, the “foolish” bridesmaids go in search of oil. While they are gone, they miss the groom's arrival. By the time they catch up to the wedding party, it is too late. The door to

the banquet is shut; the groom won't let them in. “*Lord, Lord, open to us,*” they say. And the bridegroom says, “*Sorry, I do not know you.*” (vs 11-12). Actually, wait. There's isn't even a 'sorry.' It's just – “*Truly I tell you, I don't know you.*”

Jesus finishes the parable by saying, “*Keep awake,*” which doesn't even make sense because all ten of the women (both the so called “wise” and “foolish”) fall asleep because the groom takes so long to arrive. *He's* the one who is late!! Why are the women taking the hit for his tardiness? (That's a whole other sermon I'll save for another day!)

On the surface, this is all just yet another really odd, disturbing parable.

As Lutheran pastor Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber rightly asks: “*What exactly are we supposed to take from this parable? That we should **not** rely on others? That we should **not** give to those who ask of us? Is Jesus just suddenly taking back everything he's taught so far about generosity and self-giving and instead giving us a parable about how*

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Matthew 25:1-13,” *Working Preacher* (31 March 2019), accessed on March 19, 2023 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/bridesmaids-or-talents/commentary-on-matthew-251-13-5>.

*we should be stingy and self-reliant?”<sup>4</sup>*

Isn't Jesus the same guy who, just chapters earlier in Matthew's gospel said, stuff like:

*“Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (Matthew 5:42)*

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear (or how much oil is in your lamp...).” (Matthew 6:25)*

*“knock, and the door will be opened for you ...” (Matthew 7:7)*

*“In everything, do unto others as you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 7:12)*

*“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor...” (Matthew 19:21)*

*“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” (Matthew 19:30)*

*“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces.” (Matthew 23:13)*

Are we to interpret this parable in a way that just flies in the face of everything Jesus has taught so far?

Of course not.

If we are reading it this way – that Jesus is the bridegroom who shuts the door in our faces because we forgot to bring some extra oil for our lamps and our friends (*our friends!*) won't share with us – then we're reading it too simply and simply missing the point.

Sure, you can take a lesson from this parable that says, “always be prepared,” because you never know when Jesus is coming again. After all, the word in the last verse that reads “awake” in English, is more aptly translated from the Greek *gregoreo*: “*Be watchful, keep alert, give attention to.*”<sup>5</sup>

And sure, there is nothing wrong with a “moral” of this story being “be prepared.” But

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<sup>4</sup> Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Strong's Lexicon, accessed on March 19, 2023 at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1127/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

parables are about truths much deeper than advice you could get from a Boy Scout motto! Nothing against Boy Scouts, I mean, trust me, on a hike I am Ms. Prepared. I'm the one with extra water and snacks, first aid kits, extra clothes, wet ones, tissues, medicines, batteries, all neatly packed away in my 50 pound back pack. I've got it all; I love to 'be prepared.'

But is something that serves as the motto for the Boy Scouts – really the courageous kin-dom message we are supposed to take from this parable? In a day where the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Jesus feels far off, is “be prepared” the best message for us, today? Is that as deep as the message goes? And couldn't there be a less cruel way to say, “*hey folks, be prepared!*”

Maybe we can read this parable in a different way. After all, Matthew is writing after 70 AD, and so his audience knows that as members of the Jesus' movement they are literally having doors shut in their face<sup>6</sup> by the religious authorities who are scared and fearful of Rome. And in 'real narrative time' in

Matthew's gospel, Jesus is about to have the door of the tomb shut in his face after he is crucified by Rome. And wouldn't he, of all people, have been prepared?? Yet the door was still shut on him. So what else could this parable mean?

As New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine<sup>7</sup> says, the parables as told by a rabbi like Jesus are most often about the people in that day and what is happening right then and there in Jesus' circumstances. They are not to be over-spiritualized or allegorized. There is not a “moral to the story,” like a children's book. Parables are meant to prod and provoke self-reflection. In other words, the curiosity here is not what is this parable telling us about the end times in heaven, but what is this parable telling us about ourselves in this time on earth?

What if this parable has a warning for us about community and WHO we listen to...more so than a warning about HOW prepared we are?

We're allowed to play around with the meaning of parables –

<sup>6</sup> David Roberts, “The Breaking of the Bridesmaids: Rethinking a Problematic Parable (Lectionary Reflection),” *Patheos* (3 Nov. 2014), accessed on March 19, 2023 at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/th>

e-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-undermines-a-parable/.

<sup>7</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.: New York, NY) 2014.

they are designed for that – so let's do it!

If we take the lamps as a metaphor for faith, then it is true that at any given point in a community – some of us have lights that are shining brightly and some of us have lights that are barely flickering.

Times of suffering, deep doubt and questioning, times of loneliness and depression, times where we feel like we have lost our way and just don't know what next step to take – these are times when we might feel like the women in this story who have run out of oil for their lamps. They had a lamp and it had oil in it but they've just been burning and burning and burning (at both ends) and they just don't have any reserves left. And it has nothing to do with how prepared they were or weren't.

Remember, we are not told why the so called “foolish” in the story did not take any extra oil for their lamps. Perhaps they didn't have any extra oil to bring. Maybe they did, but they thought someone else in their home would need it. Maybe they just trusted that the groom would actually arrive when he was supposed to! (Ironically that

would make the “wise” ones the ones with ‘little faith’ – skeptical that the groom would arrive on time, they brought extra oil!)

The point being – we don't know why some women had extra oil and why some didn't. And maybe that's not relevant to the point of the parable at all. Just like we don't know why some of us seem to be facing really challenging burdens all the time, and others seem to be in a season where life is good and there aren't many challenges. Sometimes life feels really unfair in that way. But it just is what it is; we can't explain or change it. The question is: what do we do with it?

Well – we are a community, right? That's why we do this thing called faith *together*. Let's say that Jesus IS the ‘bridegroom’ in this parable. If that's the case, then it makes perfect sense to me that where there are a group of people waiting to greet Jesus – there's gonna be a mix of resources and reserves. Some of us have all we need and more; others of us are barely hanging on and our light is flickering dimly if not already snuffed out.

I wonder. What would have happened if the women with the lamps whose oil was running out just decided to stay put and *not* go get more oil? The groom never asks them to make sure their lamps are bright when they greet him. And couldn't the five women with barely flickering lights, have just stuck really close to their friends who had plenty of oil? Couldn't they have shared a lantern and walked two by two? What made them so afraid or ashamed of their scarcity that they risked missing the groom by leaving the scene?

And also – think about this: if the groom is coming in the middle of the night – how is *he* walking in the dark? Clearly he has a light or lantern of his own!<sup>8</sup>

And, truly, if you want to read Jesus as the 'bridegroom' in this story – isn't Jesus the *Light of the World*? The one who illumines our lives? Whenever he arrives, at the end of times or here in our times, won't his light be enough to light up the night sky? As it says in Revelation 22:5 – “*In the city of God, they will not need the light of a lamp,*

*for the Lord God will give them light.*”

You see, if the women whose lamps are burning dimly in this story are “foolish,” – it's not because they don't have enough oil in their lamps OR weren't prepared OR fell asleep. It's because they listened to the voices of these other five women who told them that what they had in their lamps wasn't enough...that they had to go out and search and find more oil to buy in order to be ready to meet the groom. They believed the lie that they couldn't meet Jesus with their lack or their need. They believed these external voices that said, “you don't have enough...you need more!” rather than trusting the voice of God that says, “*it's okay...it's not about what you have or don't have...it's about being close to me, your God, your Creator.*”

What if these five women had said, “*No, we're not going to get oil. We're just fine as we are. Even in the dark, we're okay. Jesus will find us, and we're just gonna stay close to you until he comes.*”

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<sup>8</sup> Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*



Whether we admit it or not, this is a hard message for most of us, if not *all* of us. To believe that *Who* we are is enough. That *What* we have (right now) is enough. To trust in a theology of abundance and belovedness. To trust that Jesus will greet us and meet us – always – just as we are – whether we are shining brightly or barely flickering in our faith. Whether we have energy to run out and greet him or are barely moving and are stuck in a rut.

The world wants to fool us into thinking that in order to be prepared in life we have to have it all together and be bright and shiny and glowing all the time. But that is just not life. Nor is what God asks of us. God simply asks us for presence. To stay near.

You know, I think the key to this parable is in the unnamed voice at midnight that shouts: *“Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”* (vs 6)

This is an invitation. And a warm, excited one! There are no qualifications like “keep your lamps trimmed and burning!” or make sure “your lamp doesn’t go out!” No. This voice

shouting out in the depths and darkness of the night simply says: “Look! Come! Meet!”

Look. Come. Meet.

That is our invitation from God.

As Rev. Bolz-Weber says, “The foolish bridesmaids weren’t foolish because they didn’t bring ‘back up’ oil, they were foolish because instead of trusting that the light of Christ was enough to shine the way, they wasted all that time and energy and money trying to get their own because someone shamed them into thinking they could never approach the Lord with their lack or need. Rather than just trusting that the light of those around them and the light of the groom was enough they assumed they had to provide their own— and then they were so consumed by the shame of not being enough [or having enough], they busied themselves trying to fix it – so much so that they missed the wedding banquet. They missed everything”<sup>9</sup>...trying to be something other than who they were in that moment.

Rev. Bolz-Weber continues saying, quite profoundly, “Of

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<sup>9</sup> Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*

course the bridegroom said ‘I don’t know you’ when they arrived because they hadn’t come to him in their need and lack and want. Jesus knows us not by our independence from him, Jesus knows us by our need of him, for which we should never be ashamed... These bridesmaids, perhaps not unlike us, mistakenly assumed that all God is interested in is our strength, our preparedness, and [our] goodness. **When what God really asks of us is to know our need for God.**”<sup>10</sup> To trust that we cannot rely on just ourselves, but we need God and we need each other.

“Even if we have nothing,” says Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, “God can do a lot with nothing.”<sup>11</sup>

She writes, “At the feeding of the 5,000 when Jesus asks the disciples what they have with them to feed the crowd... He said ‘what do you have?’ and they say ‘nothing – nothing but a couple loaves and a few fish.’ They say it like it’s a problem. But do we not have a God who created the universe out of nothing, that can put flesh on dry bones nothing, that can put life in a dusty womb nothing, I

mean...let’s face it... NOTHING is like God’s favorite raw material to work with. Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as “nothing” “Insignificant” “worthless” and says “Ha! Now **that** I can do something with.”<sup>12</sup>

So...if you are sitting here today and feel like you have nothing to give, no gas left in your tank...if you are sitting here today wondering when the flame of faith will start to burn brightly for you, because right now it is smoldering and smoking...if you are sitting here today feeling like you have to go out and get something else or do something else to get your life together enough to be acceptable to God or to this community – then stop. Breathe. Don’t be fooled. *That* is not the voice of God...that is some ‘other’ voice – some other lie or illusion that wants you to believe you are not enough as you are or that you have to have it all together. You do not.

The most foolish thing you could do right now is to try to go out and go away from God and go off and try to fix yourself in order to be ready or acceptable for God or others.

<sup>10</sup> Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*

Just stay. Remain. Don't pull back; *lean in*. Even if you are in the dark. Cozy up close to someone who has a light, and wait with them until the light of Christ comes close enough to you to illumine your way.

And – if you are one who has a brightly shining light right now – if you have oil in your lamp – good for you. *Great* for you! God is ready and waiting to use you. Don't send other people away telling them they need to go get this or that or to do this checklist of spiritual practices to be like you or to have faith. Just let them sit in your light for a while. Walk with them. Tell them they are enough. Remind them Jesus is not only coming, but Jesus is here. In your brightly shining Light and also in their barely flickering flame too. After all, all of the oil that makes these flames burn is from God anyway. It's not our personal oil...as if we do something to get more 'light' than others.

Counter-cultural though it may be, Christian community is not about self-reliance. Christ teaches, without apology, that we need each other and that we need him. Christian community is about relying on one another, which teaches us the essential

spiritual truth of relying on God. We need each other; we need Jesus. None of us will ever be prepared on our own. We can't be. It's impossible. Even the so-called "wise" bridesmaids who had extra oil, they, too, fell asleep waiting for the groom. And they wouldn't have been awake or ready to meet him had the voice in the night not yelled out, "*Look! Here he comes!*" Everybody needs somebody. Faith is not a solo sport.

And like the other five women who didn't share their oil, it is tempting to believe that we should conserve what we have because it feels like we have worked for it and been careful and prepared and to share it with others – well, that may mean that one day we'll run out of what we need and then we'll become the ones asking for help (as if that's the worst thing in the world!).

It's tempting to believe that foolishness and call it wisdom. Because that's the message we hear all the time from our banks and bosses. But we are working for a kin-dom that is not like the one we are living in. It is altogether different. It is upside down and inside out; the kin-dom of God says it's not about "being prepared" it's about

“being present.” Be here. Now.  
With and for one another.  
Because if we’re not present;  
we’ll miss what God is doing  
right here in our midst.

Calvary – can we be present to  
the God that is here with us  
now, calling us to Look! Come!  
Meet! Christ, right here and  
right now? Can we take stock of  
the resources we *do* have (and  
not what we do not) and trust  
that WHO we are today is  
enough to meet and follow  
Christ who will equip us and  
lead us brightly into our future?  
(Even when it feels like we’re  
walking in the dark?)

Perhaps it takes the most heart  
(remember the Latin root for the  
word courage is *cour*, which  
means heart)...perhaps it takes  
the most heart...the most  
courage to believe that God can  
use us – just as we are – and that  
we do not need to worry about  
approaching God with our lack  
or our need. In fact, God is  
eager to welcome us in our need  
and in our lack. That’s who God  
is – our Maker, Creator, and  
Need-Ful-Filler.

And honestly, the more  
prepared we are, the more “stuff  
“God has to peel away” to get  
us back to our authentic selves.

To our basic need as humans.  
To love and be loved.

Don’t be fooled by the voices  
that say we need more than who  
we are right now. Trust this  
moment. Trust this version of  
yourself. Trust this version of  
our church...Christ’s church.

Listen again to the voice that  
shouts out into the night, into  
our darkness...the voice of  
inner-wisdom, the voice of the  
Divine, the voice of Truth...

Have faith not in the voices that  
peer pressure from all around us  
saying, “Be prepared! Do more!  
Be More”

No, have faith in the voice that  
shouts out in our darkest  
night...the voice that simply  
says: Look. Come. Meet.

Only a fool can fail at that  
invitation.

So what are we waiting for?

Christ is here – and so are we.  
Let’s go meet him.

Amen.