

**“The Missing God”**  
**(Pr 27) 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – 11/8/20 – Mt. 25:1-13/A**

It’s been quite a week...anxiety, elation, frustration, quiet optimism, anger, patience – we the people have felt them all. In the midst of America’s presidential election process, there have been voices crying out – on both sides, at times – “Where is God?” It may have been framed in your head as “How can God let this happen?” or “Why doesn’t God stop this?” or even “Has God really given this into our hands?” For some, this might be the first time in your life when you wondered, if just for a moment in a critical time, if God was missing in action.

The whole 25<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew could be titled, “Jesus’ Last Lecture.” Since we just heard his First Lecture (The Sermon on the Mount) last Sunday on All Saints Day, we may feel as if our reading assignment was the Cliff’s Notes version of Matthew’s Gospel. For during this Final Class we feel like we have missed a few pages – pages that alerted us that something very different is about to happen. Jesus is facing what lies ahead in Jerusalem – the end of his life – and he is keenly aware that his very presence has changed the lives of his disciples who have now reached their points of no return. It is exactly where we are as Christians today, because we already know what Jesus taught. We know what he did, and we even confess that we believe it. We, too, feel the weight of a point of no return. We, too, await the Return of the King. We, too, ponder the question, “how then shall we live, with a God who is missing?”

There are three final parables we will hear before the Season of Pentecost ends. The first is called, *The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids*. The main character in this parable is a bridegroom, and he is AWOL – he has not yet arrived at his own wedding – he is absent. We have entered into a story that seems to offer instructions about **How to Get to Heaven**. But here’s a clue: Jesus usually describes heaven with the phrase, “*The kingdom of heaven is like...*” (a mustard seed, a pearl of great price, a man who owns a field or a vineyard.) But this time, Jesus changes his introductory formula when he starts the story, “*THEN, the kingdom of heaven will be like this...*” and he proceeds to tell them about preparing for a long wait until the joy returns. But, apparently, there is also a deadline on the waiting, at which point the consequences of our choice and our actions will be judged righteous or not.

But is that the message for us as well? How does that square with our picture of a loving God? Are we to be motivated by fear of exclusion or punishment? Is it really about our behavior, our actions? Where’s the grace at the door into the Kingdom Wedding Banquet? On this side of the Cross and Resurrection, we have sort of graduated from that mindset. While we cannot hear with the ears of Jesus’ crowd, we can imagine what the disciples were starting to hear as the Missing God stood among them, teaching.

Here’s a quick recap: There were 10 bridesmaids. Five wise—five foolish. They were probably thrilled to assume the honor of greeting the bridegroom and lighting his way. They would be the first to announce the beginning of the festivities with their joy and brightly burning lamps. But while they waited for a late-arriving bridegroom, their original excitement waned and they began to tire, even fell into sleep. At midnight, a shout: “Look! Here comes the bridegroom!” But some of their lamps had run dry. The foolish maids must leave the pre-party to go buy more. So, when the groom finally did arrive, they are gone, and the party in which they had a prominent role, must go ahead without them.

Yet, they are not the only ones who fail in this story. Everybody fails to be there for each other. The absent foolish ones missed sharing in their friend’s joy. The “wise” five (who could have shared some oil,) probably heeded the inner voice that whispered,

“SOMEBODY has to light up this party!” And regardless of how well they fulfilled their obligation, they just weren’t there for their sisters in a time of need.

And the groom—how is he not the paragon of insensitivity? He won't let his friends in because they're late? It was his delay that made them wait, and they've been off in the middle of the night enterprising a new stock of oil for his wedding! On top of that he insults them by saying, “I don't know you!” blowing up friendships to cover up his own guilt. Wow.

Sometimes we're so obsessed and distracted by our lamps and our oil—our own worries, our own deficiencies—that we forget our friends, our families, or anyone in need - and neglect our responsibilities to God. It doesn't really doesn't matter how much oil we have in our lamps, or how well others meet our expectations. What matters is that we're there for each other, and we're ready, together, to accept the invitation, to serve, to wait, to celebrate, to share. And that's more important in these challenging times than ever.

Robert Capon has some helpful thoughts to help us make sense of a story about a Missing God and instructions for choices and actions that don't even get us what we think they will. He deftly passes by those details that start with us and our perspective and switches the focus to God. So, if this parable makes you anxious about not doing enough for God, or being caught unprepared, or being embarrassed that your actions have impacted others negatively, then here is the key to this Parable of Judgment. (For none of us want to give of ourselves for God only to have God not even recognize us on the Day of Judgment.) Here's how Capon sees it:

**Faith is the only criterion for judgment. Faith active in love is the greatest calling we have.** In the final judgment it is not those who are fortunate enough to afford an endless supply of oil that are blessed, any more than it is the inability to provide more than they have that curses. ***It is only faith or unfaith that matters.***

Remember that Faith is not a proposition that you accept. It is not a choice to be made. It is the living, breathing relationship in which God created us and has graciously invited us to participate. That's why we baptize infants. They don't get to choose to be God's children, they just are. We just are. (John 15.16) *You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.*

And those among us who seem to have been excluded along the way? We might recognize that they began, as we all did, being included. The bridesmaids were invited. The disciples were called, even Peter and Judas. The bruised and broken ones who try hard to make up for their lack of planning by making a midnight run for oil were part of a fellowship of friends. We, who may feel disenfranchised or excluded in community, are children of the same heavenly Father. What holds us all together is our trust in something bigger than ourselves, and that is truly, a state of grace. Now, since God has already provided us with that amazing grace, why in the world would we not live as if that is the absolute, bottom line truth of who we are. Our Blessed Assurance.

We are just a few weeks away from the Season of Advent, where we will be reminded what we in this community of Advent know very well. That God was never missing, but has been Emmanuel, God with us, since the beginning of time. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser  
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS.

**Resources:** Peter Wallace for *Day1*; Robert Farrar Capon *Parables of Judgment*