

JOSHUA 24:1-3a, 14-25

PSALM 78:1-7

I THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

MATTHEW 25:1-13

Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost; Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 12, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Oil Your Lamp!

The lectionary readings chosen for today are about as misplaced as any texts could possibly be. The problem? For all intents and purposes, these should be Advent lessons, apocalyptic, endtime, words normally reserved for the four Sundays prior to Christmas. Yes, this season of expectant, anticipatory, waiting is coming, and coming soon! Futuristic in nature, Advent texts typically signal the arrival of a new Church Year, the beginning of the liturgical calendar, a transition that is still three weeks away from today. **These graphic stories from the Gospels and the Epistles depict the belief of Jesus' followers in the early Church, and a conviction held by many today, in Jesus' return, his supposed second coming, theologically speaking called the Parousia. For a lot of us who grew up in a heavily evangelistic, not necessarily evangelical, environment driven by "rapture" theology, made up word, "rapture," not theology, reading these texts brings to mind psychologically damaging memories, conjuring up, a whole lot of dreadfully negative images.** This disastrous imagery signaled the worst outcome including an epic showdown, the ultimate battle depicting some kind of bizarre Armageddon, complete with catastrophic car, plane, and train crashes and other shock effect events as the faithful without warning are suddenly catapulted, whisked away to their new home in eternity, leaving the cares of the world and the sinfully unrepentant reprobates behind, purveyors of sin politely left in the rearview mirror to live on a Godless earth led by the mythical Antichrist. How nice! Oh, the horror of it all! And we all thought Halloween was over for another year! With all that frightening background being acknowledged, a major challenge confronting our homiletical pursuits this morning is to reframe, and as I like to say,

to recalibrate and retrofit, these scriptures with the hope of offering a positive and relevant, a more wholesome or holistic, message. As always, we are engaging what sometimes amounts to a paper chase in search of an elusive interpretation, an understanding that can evade us. We look for a new idea, revolutionary if possible, that has the capacity to enhance our contemporary setting, that perhaps can even embolden and empower us for the living of these, yes, our days. **All that being said regarding our liturgical context today we turn aside to see if there is a contemporary word in these timebound texts, though never outdated, to inform and impact our stewardship, not only the way we live, a holistic approach that reflects our lives as gifts to God and to one another, but specifically related to our ecclesial participation as an active and proud member of the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River. Against the backdrop of our annual celebration of stewardship in worship, together we will discover where these texts take us as we embark on what I hope will be another adventuresome sermonic journey as pastor and people. By the way, we have been doing this thing for two years now! Where has the time gone?**

As I mentioned in my sermon from a week ago, there is always difficulty in preaching certain texts from the Hebrew Bible, specifically the readings known as *herem* texts. These are biblical narratives that call for the complete destruction, the annihilation, the extermination, thus the genocide, a fitting final solution, supposedly deserved, befitting of any of the various tribes and clans who by virtue of their very existence in a desired location accidentally got in the way of the manifest destiny agenda of the conquering Israelites as they crossed the Jordan and targeted every indigenous culture. Yes, this conquering, marauding, band, a people of nomadic origin now settling in and for an agrarian life, seized the fertile land flowing with milk and honey, the Land of Canaan, claiming in the name of Yahweh territory the victors believed had been given by divine right to them. Pogrom anyone? When we read these kinds of biblical texts we simply cannot gloss over these purported commands, orders credited to Yahweh as divine blessing, God conveniently thanked after the trauma, lavished with offerings, heaped with praise for whatever demonic misery was inflicted on the diverse populations, all the inhabitants perceived to be their sworn enemies, adversarial to the One they now worshipped. These kinds of texts clearly cannot and do not constitute the word of the Lord in any way whatsoever and that fact must be

named with sobering clarity every time they are read, no matter the context. In no way do they serve as any template for our contemporary reality. And yet, we cannot avoid or ignore these texts because they are a part of what is indeed a rich religious heritage, a proud faith tradition, yes, part of the spiritual legacy that has brought all of us of Judeo-Christian origin to this time and place. And yes, perhaps ironically, considering all we know about these *herem* texts, there is material in these narratives that indeed offer us much needed perspective as we seek to live by faith in a world that is as conflicted now as it was then. **Today I would like to focus on one word from our lection from the Hebrew Bible in Joshua and that word is "covenant," a word that is pregnant, yes, overflowing with meaning and indeed speaks volumes about our stewardship in terms of the commitments we make to God, to one another, and to self, and yes, our fidelity, financial and otherwise, to this steeple where we live out our faith, work out our salvation, putting our beliefs into practice.**

One of the features I love about our denominational home in the United Church of Christ is that we are a covenantal people and not connectional, the difference in our relationships profound and even radical to a certain degree. Covenantal conveys far more than nuance, much more than mere semantics. Covenant suggests commitments made by choice, without coercion or manipulation, a model of mutuality that is horizontal in nature. Connectionalism, on the other hand, implies a certain level of hierarchy, a top down model that operates by virtue of a principle of verticality. The covenantal model is based on trust, mutual commitments born of a spirit of collegiality that honors freedom of conscience, theologically described as the priesthood of all believers, ecclesiologically known as the autonomy of the local church, accepting and affirming differences of opinion, each church charting its course, determining its future pathways, expecting the same from its congregants. We are United Church of Christ (UCC) because we choose to be, desire to be, want to be, maybe even because we long to be! Connectionalism suggests financial contracts, legalities, apportionment, dues, while covenant is steeped in generosity, gladsome and joyful giving, yes, the quintessential definition of a fragrant offering. It also holds true that autonomy, this liberating level of being and doing, an exhilarating expression of our creative spark, can indeed lead to dysfunction in the system, and at its core every church is a family system. Every yin apparently

has a yang! Yes, dysfunctional diversity is always a risk, an ever present danger. And yet despite that constant threat to a church's collective health, at its core the Free Church tradition, of which we as congregationalists, lower case "c", are a part, as messy as it can be, would have it no other way. At its best, at its most encouraging and fulfilling, this polity, these congregational processes, the "congregational way" as it is known, is a paradigm, yes, a structure, that creates a solid foundation for accomplishing mission and ministry, locally and globally. **Covenants offer frameworks that honor a certain level of independence, depending on the interdependence of an individual and the group, knowing that it takes all of us together to become the best and most fulfilled body of Christ that a local missional church can be. Relationships, the essence of covenant living, are always fragile, always messy, always challenging, always works in progress demanding intensive work, never taken for granted. Successful covenants maintain a high level of "give gap, take gap," requiring everyone to sacrifice at least to some degree, that each participant gladly and generously gives and receives, willingly giving up and getting, winning and losing, in a process that is reciprocal, not transactional, devoid of quid pro quo expectations or extortion. Sometimes that means that an individual, or even a group, every now and then becomes disappointed or frustrated and yet, on more than occasion, equally satisfied.**

And yes, covenants demand inherent expectations, are based in requirements, agreements freely determined by the group, a willingness to choose affiliations, alliances, allegiances, such as the UCC, all of which spring forth from a spirit of volunteerism. And in that regard, disregarding the aforementioned baggage, so it was with the children of Israel once they had crossed the Jordan River and claimed their new homeland. The former Hebrew vagabonds understood that being set apart meant abandoning some practices while embracing others. After a long journey through an exilic wilderness, the day among many important days had arrived. On a certain day they were required to choose, to make a decision, facing a choice that would be permanent, an irreversible turning point, remembering the Law that had literally been etched in stone, reminding them of their adventuresome journey and now marking another beginning point in time in their unfolding evolution as a people, a history of their emerging civilization now firmly in the making. On this bellwether day this particular people was confronted

with an either/or decision. **They would either choose to follow after the numerous gods associated with the other cultures with whom they had once cohabitated, happily and not, by choice and by force, or they would now cling to the God they had intimately come to know as Yahweh, the great “I Am!”** No both/and was allowable, not an option! Decision time is decision time! What to do, what to do? And we know what they decided to do! On this day they chose this still newly discovered and unfolding understanding of God, mono rather than polytheistic, a radical image not crafted, minted by human hands, the One of whom they were learning, getting to know with each and every passing day. Despite writings to the contrary that in numerous places depict a walking and talking, humanesque, anthropomorphic deity, God masquerading as a male human being, incarnational on steroids, was beautifully but subtly revealed in other texts as a God of transcendent mystery, of awe and wonder, God the very essence of Spirit, the Ruah, as pervasive and illusive as the wind, blowing where and as it will. And the rest, as they say, is history and that history continues to unfold, revealed in both the most beautiful and the most horrific ways, nothing new in any of that kind of societal struggle!

Textually shifting gears in a rather dramatic fashion for a moment, if we take the Gospel lection from Matthew at face value as a parable about an anticipated return of Jesus, an understandable mythic belief offering a modicum of assurance and comfort to Jesus’ persecuted, terrorized and tortured followers in the early Church, many of whom became martyrs for the cause. If we parrott their unwavering naïve belief in an event that never occurred as was assumed and predicted, then there really is not much point in reading this story, the original message easily interpreted but seemingly irrelevant after more than two thousand years of anticipatory, expectant, disappointment. And so I am going to take some extreme liberties with this Matthean parable and present it in a new light, being totally honest, completely transparent about what I am doing in these moments. Unlike the Gospel of Luke, Matthew contains very few parables though we are given an excellent example today. The skinny on the story is that there were five wise bridesmaids, virgins all, and five foolish ones, the bride intentionally no doubt, but strangely forgotten or left out of the storyline. Five of them were prepared for the festive evening, their lamps full including extra if needed. Sure enough the bridegroom tarried, was delayed, detained by someone

or something and thus did not arrive to the big dance late into the night. They all became drowsy and fell asleep! Well, as we know, the five wise girls had enough oil to get them through the night while the five foolish ones had run out of oil and were forced to go and buy some more, something that would have probably been impossible considering the late hour. Of course the early Church saw this parable as descriptive of those who were prepared to meet Jesus in the air and those who were not.

What if we think outside the box just a bit, something that should not be hard for a congregation that sometimes cannot even find the box—good thing—color outside the lines a little, giving us some leeway regarding this story and ponder it anew as if for the first time. What if we thought about this parable in light of our consideration of stewardship. What if we read this parable with a new understanding, abandoning the nightmare potential waiting for the blindly unaware and unprepared while giving some thought to a new idea. What if we juxtaposed images of scarcity and lack against abundance and generosity, hoarding against freely giving. What if the five truly wise women in this parabolic scenario made the risky decision to share of their provisions, made a covenant, a pact, with their sisters, knowing that this gamble would mean that they too could run out of oil and that all of them might just be left in the dark, but also knowing that perhaps there might be enough, just enough to get the job done. Distinct possibility! What a wonderful covenant decision that would be! The early Church had bought into a theological proposition that demanded reward and punishment, justice and judgment, heaven and hell. Despite their faith, their resolve, surely the evil perpetuated by Roman occupation evidently had soured them all at least to a degree. They longed for an escape mechanism! They desperately needed an out! When we read these warnings it is as if they had forgotten all the graciously good gifts brought to Jesus' followers by the man from Nazareth during his brief life and briefer ministry. It is as if they had amnesia about the rabbi whose words were indeed the bread of life, who proclaimed the words of eternal life. Where did it all get off track? Where did it all go so wrong? Why did the early Church go down the proverbial rabbit hole? When did the apparent dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith emerge, almost as if in competition, competing narratives? How did we move from the light of grace to the darkness of guilt and all the despair that goes with it, this shift occurring in the

brevity of such a few short years? Heaven can wait! Hell is what you make of it! Who needs it? Jesus came with a divine carrot, never a stick, and unlike Moses, had no need to carry one.

Part of the beauty of being beloved faith community, of being a part of a local missional church, a congregation sharing so many good and wonderful things in common, is that not only do we seek a higher calling, to bring Jesus' lovingly gracious model of social justice to the world, but that we are there for one another, carrying the heavy load when load-bearing is too much, when burdens are overwhelming for any one person, threatening to get the best of us. Yes, that is when we are at our best, covenantal community, the best of any systemic family dynamic! Indeed, we share our oil so that our light might burn brightly! And yes, it takes oil, a lot of oil, to light our lamps! Yes, this kind of sharing is the essence of covenant living. When I read the old, old story of Jesus, a story written on my heart and mind, as I know it is with you as well, I read of the most selfless human being who has ever lived, who shared deeply of himself, giving away his being until there was nothing left to give. I read about someone who was nonjudgmental, though clearly sharing his convictions with anyone who would listen. He was candid, honest, transparent, in every way, the essence of integrity, always graciously and inclusively loving, accepting and affirming everyone he encountered and engaged, welcoming any and everybody to his earthly table whenever he serendipidously hosted a dinner party in someone's home, and inviting one and all to the great banquet feast in the eternal realm of God. I do not read about a name-taking, record-keeping, judge just waiting to save some and damn others based on an ability, or lack thereof, to believe, to buy what he was selling, despite the threats of what those who wrote after his death opined. We have all been reminded of our worst inclinations and behavior due to recent events of the human need to keep score, to get revenge, paybacks, to exact an ounce of flesh, to garner some retributive justice, vengeance our driving motivation. It is an endless cycle we cannot seem to break. We just cannot kick the habit, extricate ourselves from the proverbial gerbil wheel, find that elusive exit ramp. Jesus gave us an offramp! We can kick the habit!

Yes, every year when we explore our stewardship we quickly turn our thoughts to money because it is our dollars that undergird everything we strive to do as a

faith community. It is true, oh so very true. But money is not the tail that wags the dog. No, that is each and every one of us under the leadership of God's Holy Spirit, guiding us, leading us, and giving us direction as best we are able to discern the will of the Holy One. Despite the rough and ragged edges of the lections chosen for today, these ancient texts are reminders that we strive to live in covenant relationship, that we are all in this together. Yes, it takes all of us to create this local churchly village, this ecclesial outpost in Eagle River, Wisconsin. Never question your importance, your role, the essentiality you bring to this beloved faith community. Every "thing", every gracious gift, every contribution, financial and human resource, helps to build this congregation and indeed, the denomination in which we are proud to be a part and joyfully join in cooperation. We are all the oil in our lamp, yes, an integral part of the light of the world. We are a beautifully woven tapestry, among the best that humanity has to offer. We are a verse of a beautiful hymn that has no end! Yes, we are the fuel, the oil for this lamp, oil lighting and illuminating the very lamp of the sacred, the eternal light of the Holy, holiness the operative word here. Look around you. There is abundance and generosity abounding, joy on every face, no scarcity in sight. We cheerfully give from that source of overflowing which is sourced in God. May our covenant commitments be renewed this day as we continue to move into the brightest future ever as the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River. May it be so, today and everyday! Grace upon grace for the journey! Godspeed!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and call us into covenant, with God, with one another and neighbor, and yes, with ourselves. Amen and amen.