

Getting Ready
Matthew 25:1-13

Heather Prince Doss
Sea Island Presbyterian Church
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It seems to me that most people fall into one of two categories: those who love to prepare and those who do not. I know exactly which category I am in – and I think that is why I do not love the parable of the ten bridesmaids. When traveling to someplace I have already been, I never think I will need directions to get there the second or third time, even if months have passed since the last visit. I can usually find my way, but sometimes my memory fails me. And I refuse to buy a GPS for my car. To me, it is no big deal to turn around a few times or stop and ask for directions. This drives my husband crazy. “Just look up the directions online and then print them,” he says. It is generally my mentality when packing for a trip that if I forget something I can either borrow it, make do without it, or buy it when I get there.

I think that makes me a foolish bridesmaid.

When I have been a bridesmaid in an actual wedding, I am generally reliable and on time and helpful, but I have never been the bridesmaid with the extra bobby pins or the sewing kit. You might ask me to stop and pick up snacks for the wedding party, but you would not assume I had already baked cookies.

If Eric had been right there watching me get ready for that first century wedding procession, he probably would have told me to pack a little extra oil, just in case. And I, undoubtedly, would have told him that he worries too much. Everything will go fine. If I really need more oil, I can borrow a little from one of the other bridesmaids. Or I can just run to CVS and pick some up. Yes, I am definitely a foolish bridesmaid.

I do not like think of it as foolish so much as . . . flexible. I generally do not get bogged down in the details. I do not mind some change in plans since I never made too many plans to begin with. And I do not mind working hard, even scrambling a little, to make sure things work out okay in the end. They usually do, after all.

So why does Jesus call me, and all those bridesmaids like me, “foolish?” One commentator suggests that to be foolish is to “assume a bright future but do little to prepare for it.”¹ That seems fair to me. Assuming that everything will always be fine is not the same as having faith. Some might call it whistling in the dark. It is blind and naïve. When things do not go according to plan, when things are not “fine,” foolish bridesmaids like me can sometimes panic or lose hope altogether. They have no physical, emotional, or spiritual resources to endure a long wait.

¹ Lindsay P. Armstrong. “Matthew 25:1-13, Homiletical Perspective” in *Feasting On the Word*, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Year A Vol. 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011) p.289.

I suppose there is another kind of foolish bridesmaid, one who does not make it into the parable at all. You might call that person one who assumes a terrible future and does too much to prepare for it. You know the people I am talking about. Maybe you are one of them. They always assume something is going to go wrong, and they have every possible contingency covered. They probably would not like being called foolish, just well-prepared. If it rains, they always have an umbrella. If the road is closed, they know an alternate route. If the bridegroom is late in coming, they have a caterer on speed dial who can put together a substitute feast in no time. To some extent, our society values this kind of foolish bridesmaid. But this kind of over-preparation can be crippling. It is not carried out in hopeful optimism but in constant pessimism and nagging fear. Sometimes it is impossible to make any move at all for fear of all the things that could go wrong. For fellow travelers, these foolish bridesmaids stifle creativity and have little patience for mistakes.

Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 offers us hope for a third way as we live our lives in a world that does not yet look like the promised kingdom of God. By the time Matthew is writing this story down, Jesus' followers have already been waiting for the Messiah to return longer than they expected or imagined. No doubt, some foolishly thought he was coming soon but did nothing to make themselves ready. Other had probably been too ready for too long – predicting dates and then changing them when Jesus did not return according to schedule. The wise bridesmaids were not the ones whistling in the dark. Neither were they preparing an alternate feast when the bridegroom could not be found.

The wise bridesmaids, like the foolish ones, fell asleep when the evening shadows grew long. The wise bridesmaids, like the foolish ones, woke up to trim their lamps when at midnight the bridegroom could finally be seen on the horizon. All the bridesmaids grew weary of waiting and napped. All of the bridesmaids finally saw the one for whom they waited coming down the lane. What makes the wise bridesmaids different from the foolish ones is this: plenty of oil for their lamps.

I recently saw a first century Judean oil lamp, and it was much different than I expected. When I think of an oil lamp, I think of a glass bowl that holds twelve to sixteen ounces of oil with a metal cap, a wick, and a glass hurricane. A quick look around the internet told me that lamp like that could burn for at least 24 hours if filled. A first century Judean oil lamp, though, is much smaller. It is made of clay and is about the size of a half-dollar coin. It fits in the palm of your hand and probably holds two or three tablespoons of oil. I cannot imagine that it would burn for very long.

Even a foolish bridesmaid like me can see that it might be prudent to carry a little extra oil for a lamp like that.

Being a wise bridesmaid does not mean you have to bring everything with you for the feast. It also does not mean that you must predict every possible point of failure and prepare for it. Being a wise bridesmaid does mean recognizing that the future is unknown, but it also means trusting that the future is secure. The bridegroom is coming – Christ will come to complete the redemption of the world; this is not as good as it gets. There will be a party, and it will not start

until he arrives. But after three millennia of waiting, we do not know when he shall come. Our call is neither to whistle naïvely in the dark nor to force God’s plan to fit our own.

Our call is to prepare for that “unknown but secure future.”² As individuals, we are tiny little lamps. We cannot simply assume that we have enough physical, emotional, or spiritual resources to endure the long wait through personal hardship and global turmoil. We prepare for the coming bridegroom and the coming kingdom of God by gathering with other who also wait and then by living like the Kingdom is already here. Mending broken relationships, offering words of gratitude, loving our families, helping a stranger, teaching child, sharing our bread, and following through on all those Spirit-filled dreams – these are the ways that we pour oil in our lamps. They will not make the Savior come any sooner, but they will make the wait a little brighter.

Hopefully even a foolish bridesmaid can wait like that.

² Ibid.