

## The In-Between Time©

Matthew 25:1-13

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This story seems strange to us, doesn't it? Our experience with weddings is so different from this story in Matthew that it may be a little hard to figure out, to make any sense of at all.

I think of bridesmaids as those women all dressed up in formal attire, usually matching dresses, or at least they are similar in color and style, coming down the aisle with uncomfortable heels, holding their bouquet of flowers, coming one by one up to where I am standing with the groom, lining up on the stairs, waiting and watching for the bride to come down the aisle.

Of course, when the wedding is over, the bridesmaids, along with the maid of honor, the best man and all the groomsmen, have a place of honor at the head table with the bride and groom, to enjoy the festivities of the wedding reception, eating good food, dancing into the night, enjoying the champagne and wedding cake.

Well, some of that might be similar to what Jesus is talking about in this parable. The wedding banquet was a great festivity in Jesus day. In fact, wedding celebrations lasted for a week in those Palestinian villages.

A wedding was a great event. Even the Rabbi's agreed, according to scholar, William Barclay, that a wedding could be reason to set aside studying the law for the celebration.

When a couple married, they would take the longest possible road to their new home, accompanied by their chosen friends – their wedding attendants, and gathering up a crowd of well-wishers on the way. It was week long, joyous celebration!

Barclay tells the story of Dr. J. Alexander Findlay, Principal of Didsbury Methodist College in Manchester, England. Findley went to Palestine to visit and tells this story:

"When we were approaching the gates of a Galilean town, I caught sight of ten maidens gaily clad and playing some kind of musical instrument, as they danced along the road in front of our car. When I asked what they were doing the interpreter told me they were going to keep the bride company until her bridegroom arrived.

Findley writes, "I asked if there was any chance that we might see the wedding, but the interpreter shook his head and said, "It might be tonight, or tomorrow night, or in a fortnight's time, nobody ever knows for certain."

He explained that one of the great things to do was to try to catch the bridal party napping. So, it seems, the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, sometimes in the middle of the night.

There is someone who goes before him shouting: "Behold! The bridegroom is coming!" But it could happen at any time he chooses. The bridal party has to be ready.

Another important point is that no one was allowed to go out on the streets after dark without a lamp; and also, that once the bridegroom has arrived and the door has been shut, no one is allowed to enter the festivities.

This particular event happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Palestine but probably isn't much different than the tradition in Jesus' day. Jesus told parables, using stories, images of common events that people would relate to and understand.

People there on that day would have known the kind of wedding Jesus was referring to and they would have understood how tragic, how humiliating, it would have been for half of the wedding party to have not been prepared and to have missed out on the festivities as well.

But we also have to keep in mind that it is Jesus, through the particular lens of Matthew, who is telling this parable to a Jewish community at least 70 years after Jesus' had died. Matthew wrote this gospel for new Christians, most of whom were of a Jewish background, trying to help them understand what it meant to be a disciple – a follower of Jesus.

These were Christians who were trying to make sense out of their faith – a faith that was strongly influenced by the Jewish tradition. These were Christians who had seen the beloved temple destroyed. These were believers who had high hopes that the promise of Jesus' return was coming any day; that their suffering and oppression would soon end.

But he hadn't come yet and they were losing hope. Some were losing faith and not sure what to do.

We have been studying and hearing from Matthew's gospel for quite a few months now. You've probably come to know that he is all about discipleship, about what it means, what is expected of those who believe and follow Jesus as the Messiah – the Son of God. He is often about judgment. We hear about weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew's style may not be all that inviting to us in this 21<sup>st</sup> century but we have to understand that Matthew was trying to hold this community of Christians together – to strongly encourage them to not give up, to not go back to their old ways of life.

The truth is, all these centuries later, we are still waiting, aren't we? Or are we? Are we genuinely waiting for Jesus to return? Do you expect him to come back any day now? After all this waiting with no results, I think we see pretty clearly that, while there is a lot of hype about the second coming and some popular books and movies out there, most of the population is not living like we are really expecting anything to happen.

Would you agree? I mean, the Christian Church is declining. Many people today claim to not believe in Jesus, or even in God. They laugh at the idea of Christ returning. They think these are archaic stories told and retold by people who are not very smart.

And really, in many ways, we post-modern Christians do think differently than those early day Christians. We are influenced by science and other schools of thought. We have to do more logical thinking to be able to work out what it is we actually believe in our faith, based on what we know – on what has been proven to be true.

Do you believe that Jesus is God's Son? In fact, do you believe that he is God who came to earth to live a fully human life, to relate to us, to be among us, to experience all that we experience? Do you believe that in his death we have been given grace and that in his resurrection from the dead, we have been given the promise of eternal life? Do you believe that somehow, as unclear as it is, that long awaited promise that He will return is the truth?

I believe it is and I believe you do too, or you would not keep coming back.

The truth is, even as we believe it, we have no idea when he will come or what it will look like or be like, do we? We have no real concept of how that might look, in spite of what the movies portray. We are smart enough to know that that is fiction and those creators of fiction are not the Creator of the Universe, they don't know any more than we know.

But we still believe that God knows and that God will keep his promise and that somehow, sometime, it will take place.

So what? What does this parable from Matthew who wrote so long ago to a community of early believers who were already getting frustrated with waiting have to say to us who are so many centuries and cultures away? Can it possibly be relevant to us?

Of course, I believe it can or I would not be preaching every Sunday.

I think as we hold on to our faith and as we continue longing for this promise to be fulfilled, we must do what Matthew was trying to do in his community. He was trying to strengthen them, to unite them, to encourage them, to tell them it is worth the wait.

He was trying to help them understand that there were things to be doing in that waiting period, there were preparations to be made so they would not be caught unprepared and miss out on the joy that was coming – whenever that time came.

Matthew's teaching was very much about who Jesus is and about what it means to be his disciple – especially in a time when Jesus is no longer physically present.

For us, as for those early Jewish Christians, we have things to do in the in-between time of waiting. We too must be prepared. We, as individuals have our own personal preparations to make. We must keep our hearts open to God's leading through prayer and obedience.

We must be diligent in our study of who Jesus is and what he taught so we can learn what it means for us today to be his disciple; what it is he calls each of us to do and be.

In the seminar I attended this week in Dewitt, the question was asked, "What would it look like if Jesus were living your life?" I think we, as his followers, are about discovering that very thing and trying to live it out, with his help.

But we also, as a community have things to do for preparation. We have the responsibility of teaching our children – both in the church and at home – about discipleship.

We have the job of sorting out the call of Jesus on this particular church – what our mission is to the community we live in and how do we reach out in love and compassion to those who are hurting and in need. How do we share the good news of the gospel to those who are longing to know God's love – even if they aren't aware of what they are longing for?

Every day is day of grace. It is a time for preparation. Like the bridesmaids, we must never find ourselves unprepared, for the day will come when he will come for us. How will it look if we haven't been about doing his work, his mission?

I don't know if the door will be closed on us, as Matthew says, but I do believe there will be a great celebration and we will be so glad we were prepared, so joyfully humble to know we were a part of preparing the very kingdom of God, doing the work he has given to us.

What are you doing in this in-between time? Are you aware of the need to prepare? I think that is the important message here. We must be intentional in our living – every day – thinking about how we live our lives for Christ. For in our obedience to Him – to love God and to love others – we are preparing for the great joyous day of His return.

Let us do mission and ministry in his name. Let us rejoice in giving our time and talents and treasure for the continuation of this great call of Christ. Let us celebrate as new members join us. Let us hold onto one another, encouraging and supporting each other as we wait. Together, let us keep the feast instituted by Christ, our Lord, until he comes again.

Thanks be to God!

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