

Do You Have Enough Oil in Your Lamp?

John 1:1-5
Matthew 24:3-4, 36, 44
Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton

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Now, no doubt, it is a strange little story that Jesus told. Ten young women, all waiting around for the groom to arrive at the wedding party. The night grows long. Their lamps burn low. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, the groom arrives. But five of the young maiden's lamps have gone out! Only those who have brought extra oil are ready for the party to finally begin. The others frantically run to get more oil, but by then, it is too late. The doors are closed and locked. And when the five foolish bridesmaids knock and beg to come in, the bridegroom tells them he doesn't even KNOW them. And Jesus concludes the story by saying: *"WATCH therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour of his coming."*

It is, to be sure a story about WAITING...about BEING PREPARED... about having SUFFICIENT RESOURCES to withstand a long delay. It is a lesson about being READY when the time comes and the need arises.

But waiting is never easy, is it?

Matthew's church was getting tired of waiting. The first few days after Jesus' death and resurrection were a time of eager anticipation and expectation. The church eagerly looked forward to the return of Christ... the end of the age...the triumph of God...and the establishment of God's kingdom...God's rule over all creation. They thought it would happen soon...and VERY SOON!

But then, the days became weeks. The weeks became months. The months became years...and STILL the bridegroom did not come. Still Jesus did not return. As a result, the excitement...the anticipation...the eager longing for Christ's return began to dwindle. The people began to lose interest. And the church began to doze off, so to speak...just as Jesus knew it would. The wait was longer than they had expected. Their lamps began to flicker, you see. Their flames began to burn low. And it soon became apparent that it was going to take more than one lamp full of oil to make it 'til whenever it was that Christ would come again. So the gospel writer Matthew, channeling the voice of Jesus, says to the church:

"Do you have enough oil in your lamp?" or, to put it more bluntly,

"Do you have enough faith for the wait?"

The wait for Christ's return...for Jesus' "coming again", of course, goes on today. We measure it now not in decades, but in centuries – TWENTY of them...and STILL Jesus hasn't returned...at least not in glory...from on high, that is. And so we wait...and WAIT...and WAIT!

Quite frankly, however, most people I know don't even think much about Jesus' return anymore. Oh, I know the millennialist do. And I know there are all kinds of "kooks" and "crazies" out there who are constantly trying to read the sign of the times so they can predict when Christ will come riding down out of the sky on his fiery white stallion with smoke bellowing out his nostrils. But the notion that Jesus might actually return anytime soon strikes many people as slightly "strange." Most Christians I know simply don't pay all that much attention to this "return of Jesus" business that so captivated and worried the early Christians of Matthew's church some two thousand years ago. Oh, we know it's going to happen. We know Jesus is going to return SOMETIME. The Bible has told us that. But even Jesus himself said *"but of that day and of that hour NO ONE KNOWS, not even the son, but only the Father who is in heaven."* And right now, He's not telling WHEN it's going to happen. So we don't spend a lot of time thinking about it or preparing for it or anticipating it. We simply live our lives in the faith that the future belongs to

God and that ultimately, God's Kingdom WILL come and that God's will WILL BE DONE on earth, even as it is in heaven. We simply try our best to keep on keeping on for as long as we can with this thing called faith. But that, of course, makes the question all the more pressing:

“Do you have enough oil in your lamp?”

“Do you have enough faith for your journey?”

To be sure, we need a faith that is going to last...a faith that has some permanence and stability to it...a faith that will hold up and hold on in the “meantime” in which we live...the time between Christ's coming and Christ's coming again in glory. We need a faith that is strong and sure...firm and fast...a faith that has staying power...a faith that will not “burn out” as the night grows long and the bridegroom hasn't yet come.

I had a friend in college. Maybe I've told you about him before. A neat guy. Good looking. A lot of fun. But like many young people who grew up in the turbulent 1960's, he felt that something was missing in his life...that there was some truth...some meaning to life for which he needed to search. He tried drugs, and thank goodness, found out before it was a too late that that was literally a dead end. After we went to India to study in our sophomore year, he tried eastern religions...Hinduism...Buddhism...even some of the Chinese and Japanese religions. But those didn't work for him either. And then he tried Jesus. I used that word “tried” intentionally, because, in all honesty, that's all it really was...just another half-hearted attempt to find some answers to the questions of life. For awhile, he was one of the most religious people I knew...reading his Bible constantly...going to church religiously...praying continually. The problem was, it didn't last. When Dave found out Christianity didn't magically solve all his problems or give him all the answers to life in a nice neat little ten-step program, he let it go by the wayside. Jesus became for him just one more passing fad in the long parade of attempts to find rest for his soul. His faith, though it burned brightly for a short time, had no “staying power” for the long haul. He simply didn't have enough oil for his lamp.

A supernova is a star that collapses in on itself. For a while, it burns brilliantly, with the energy of a million suns. But then it quickly fades. Within weeks, or months at the most, the brilliance is gone...its energy expended...exhausted of its supply of fuel. It is impressive, to say the least. It's dramatic, to be sure. But it is short-lived. It just doesn't last.

“Do you have enough oil in your lamp?”

“Do you have enough faith for your journey?”

It is easy, sometimes, to find ourselves unprepared for the long haul of life. It's easy to underestimate what is going to be required of us or our faith. Maybe a crisis comes to test our faith...to challenge our belief...to check out our devotion and loyalty to the Lord. Or maybe it's just the peril of ordinary days where the hum-drum routine of life has an insidious way of lulling us to sleep. As life goes on...and on...and on, we sometimes grow tired and weary. Days become weeks...weeks become months...months become years. And STILL we don't really FEEL the Lord's presence in our lives. And we begin to wonder, “*Does my faith make any difference? Why do I keep waiting on Jesus to come into my life? What's the point of keeping my lamp BURNING all the time?*” But then, just when we are beginning to nod off...in the darkest hour of the night when our lamps are burning low...we may just discover that we need the light THEN more than ever.

You know, the Apostle Paul compared the life of faith to a race...a foot race, to be exact. “*I have run the race,*” he told his disciple Timothy. (2Tim.4:7) If we pressed him on the matter, I suspect that he would tell us that the race is not so much a short-distance sprint, as it is a long-distance marathon. Not over quickly, the race goes on and on, to the point that, the one running it needs a tremendous amount of stored up energy...a great deal of inner reserves...to finish it. So let me ask you again:

“Do you have enough oil in your lamp?”

“Do you have enough faith for your journey?”

Are you a short-distance sprinter in the Christian faith or one who is in it for the long haul? Do you have a faith that will last until Christ comes into your life again...that will see you through to the tough times...even through the darkest hours of the night? Or do you find your lamp beginning to flicker because it's about to run out of oil?

It may go without saying, of course, but I'm going to say it anyway! Faithfulness is a LIFETIME vocation. The scenery on the stage of life is constantly changing. We go to school for what seems like an eternity...and then we graduate...get a job...move into a place of our own. Some of us get married...perhaps even have children. And then, before we know it, the children are grown...off at school...off to work...and are married, with children of their own. After working for thirty or forty years or so, we retire. After sharing a lifetime with a spouse, we find ourselves alone. After ALWAYS having our parents there, we wake up on day and find they are no longer there. After years of sympathizing with and supporting friends and loved ones when the doctor has said the dreaded word "Cancer," suddenly the doctor's saying it to US. And it is then...PRECISELY THEN...that Jesus' question become important:

"Do you have enough oil in your lamp?"

"Do you have enough faith for your journey?"

There are, to be sure, different seasons in this thing called life...each with its own opportunities and challenges and demands. And there is surely wisdom in being aware of the changes that await us...of PREPARING for the change of scenery that is constantly happening in our lives.

But there is one thing to which you and I are called that does NOT change. Through all the seasons of life, we are called to be FAITHFUL to the presence of God in our lives...to OPEN ourselves to the love and grace of God...and to RESPOND to that love and grace by living loving, grace-filled lives not only toward God, but toward those around us as well. It is a LIFETIME vocation. Faithfulness is our continuing invitation and opportunity through all the changes which life brings our way. In each and every age and stage of life, the question we face is whether our faith is strong enough to see us through? In other words:

"Do you have enough oil in your lamp?"

To tell you the truth, I have known some folks...and I'm sure you have too...who not only had enough oil for THEMSELVES...but even had extra oil to share...people who, when the night got long and the darkness deep, were able to keep the lamp of faith burning brightly...not only for themselves...but for everyone around them as well. And I've come to the conclusion that what those people have in common is that know the SOURCE of faith...they know where to go when the night gets long...when the oil begins to run low...and when the flame begins to flicker. They know the one who created the light and called it good. They know the one who was and IS the light of the world...the one whose light shines in the darkness and the darkness has NEVER put it out. And it is to THAT light that those people are constantly going to keep their lamps of faith burning brightly.

There is an old gospel/ camp/ VBS song that's always been a favorite of mine...the tune of which has been rattling around in my head all week. Perhaps you know it as well. And though we often think of it as a cute children's song, it is, in reality, a song of great meaning and significance. It is a song which is, in reality, a PRAYER to the one who is the very SOURCE of light...the one whose return we await with our lamps of faith burning brightly. It goes like this:

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning...burning...burning!

Give me oil in my lamp, I pray! (Hallelujah!)

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning...burning...burning!

Keep me burning til the break of day!

Will you pray with me:

Give us oil, Gracious God, for the darkness of the night!

Give us light, sufficient for the wait.

Give us faith...enough, and plenty to spare, we pray!

In the name of Him who is the oil...the light...the faith,
even Christ Jesus, our Lord, whose coming into
our hearts and minds and lives we live and celebrate
EVERY day.

In His Holy name we pray, Amen!

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