

“Sleepers Awake!”
Based on Matthew 25:1-13
December 6, 2009
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Jesus tells us in this morning’s gospel reading, there were ten girls waiting to celebrate the homecoming of the bridegroom, five foolish ones and five wise ones. And we get that the five girls who had extra oil for their lamps were the smart ones. Like good boy scouts, their motto was “be prepared.” What a great motto that is, by the way. Whoever came up with that one should get a special lifetime achievement badge. Be prepared. It tells you to be responsible, to be flexible, and to deal as best you can with any new situation—be prepared. Good idea.

In the movie “Up,” that we saw on Friday night, the wilderness explorer—a thinly disguised version of a boy scout—constantly carries a huge, jangling, backpack—with pots, pans, flashlights dangling from it. He even has a wilderness explorer GPS with him at all times—until he accidentally throws it out the window, somewhere over South America. Russell, the wilderness explorer boy, is the picture of the good scout—he is prepared. The movie’s message, though is that no one is ever really prepared for all the things that come our way, and all the things that don’t. Mr. and Mrs. Frederickson are prepared for a baby, but the baby doesn’t happen. They keep preparing to go to South America and see Paradise Falls, but their savings gets used for household emergencies instead. Mr. Frederickson isn’t prepared to become friends with Russell the wilderness explorer boy or with the ten foot exotic bird they call Kevin, or with the dog, Doug, all of who are thrown into his lap by coincidence and their own needs. The movie does a really good job of showing how to be grateful and even to celebrate all those things we were not prepared for, all those things we didn’t expect, and really didn’t think we wanted. It occurred to me that getting what you didn’t expect, and not getting what you did expect, is a big part of what Advent is about, and even, for the world outside the church, what Christmas is about. And of course, getting what you didn’t expect, and not getting what you did expect, is a big part of what **life** is about. Being prepared, for Jesus, often means being prepared to deal with what you didn’t expect.

Only half of the ten girls waiting for the bridegroom to get there are really prepared. Five of them, Matthew tells us, were foolish, and five were wise. Foolish is a great word, isn’t it? They’re not stupid, but silly—not really paying attention to what they should pay attention to, or not thinking ahead. “When the foolish took their lamps,” Matthew then tells us, “they took no oil with them.” Say, they really are foolish! Duh. How exactly is the lamp supposed to keep on burning while they wait, without oil? Then again, when I went to North Carolina in September, I took my laptop computer, intending to do lots of work on it, but forget to bring the power cord. Foolish. So exactly like the oil lamp, I could work only as long as the battery, the oil that was in the lamp already, lasted,—and then the computer shut down, the light went out and I’m done. Foolish.

What makes the other five girls wise, it seems, is that they think it through. They realize that they don’t really know when the bridegroom is coming. They realize that this might

take some time, so better to take extra oil just in case. Better to know that however long the wait is, they have the fuel on hand to light their lamps.

And other than electricity for the computer, what fuel should we make sure we have on hand? What keeps our lamps burning? The gospel is telling us, Jesus is telling us, that we need to think about what's going to keep us going for the long haul. We need to think about where our fuel is coming from.

The church in the last few decades has gotten away from the idea of providing fuel, providing what is sometimes known as “bread for the journey.” We focus on doing good, doing what needs to be done, being good citizens and caring for one another. But we sometimes forget that in order to give, we also need to receive. Church is meant to be a place where both things happen. We come to be fed, each of us a hungry child of God, with needs that only this place and time can address. The need for prayer, the need for a time out of the ongoing rush of our lives, time to think and time not to think but just to be. We come with the need for beauty, to hear the music, to see the tree and the candles and the bows and to see God's creation in a different way, framed by these great glass windows, and to hear the beauty that is in the scripture, and to taste the nourishment God gives us in the wheat and the grape. This time in our week is meant to feed us all. But the feeding has a purpose. The bread is not cake, it is not a tasty treat for the sheer pleasure of it—it is bread for the journey. We come not to be lulled into sleep. We come to be fueled for the journey of our lives in Christ.

One funny thing about this gospel story is that even though Jesus says, “Therefore, keep awake,” in fact all ten girls—foolish and wise alike, actually fall asleep. It's a long wait. The bridegroom got stuck in traffic or something—he's delayed, Jesus says. And it's been a long day for these ten girls, apparently. They get sleepy and they doze off—all of them. The difference between the foolish and the wise is not in fact who stays awake, but who is ready to wake up and greet the bridegroom when he comes near. When that moment arrives, the foolish girls are sadly missing. They're so foolish that when they wake up and hear the bridegroom is coming and realize they have no oil in their lamps, they run down to the corner store to get some. So they're not even there when the bridegroom arrives. Thus breaking the first rule of how to be a good Christian, and that first and foremost rule is: Show up. The foolish girls do not show up—not because they don't want to, but rather because they just were not prepared. They're out running around getting the fuel that they should have had with them.

That's what happens when you don't know where your fuel is going to come from. You end up running here and there, looking for it, begging for it, paying for it. Pretty much every commercial that comes on tv is offering you some version of fuel, none of which is going to take you very far. Speaking for myself, when I run out of gas, I end up doing things like baking brownies and eating them in hopes that they will energize me at least temporarily. Now you know and I know that brownies are not what we need. The bread of life, yes. Brownies, no. And all that running around and baking and fussing and eating takes so much time and effort that we forget to do that first and foremost thing, that thing we really need to do, we forget to show up. God help us, we're so busy

looking for fuel to keep our lamps burning, we forget to do the thing we needed the lamps for in the first place.

This is what Advent is for. To remember how to prepare ourselves. To remind us to think about where our fuel is coming from, do we have enough, and if not, what do we really need to do to increase our supply. Maybe ten minutes of quiet time in the day, just to be and let God speak to us. Maybe writing a list of all the things unexpected blessings in our lives. Maybe time to read the biblical Christmas story again, just for your own enjoyment. Maybe a walk in the snow or just a seat near the window to look at the snow. As this gospel story reminds us, we all fall asleep once in a while. We all lose focus, get distracted, forget what's really important. The important thing is not to be constantly on the alert, but to be able to wake up and rise to the task when that messenger calls. The important thing is to know that we have the fuel to do whatever God calls us to do. God will always provide us that fuel—the bread of life never runs out, it's always here for anyone who needs it. All we have to do is remember that we are that anyone—we do need what God provides in scripture, in worship, in prayer, in silent contemplation and in fellowship. The bread for our journey is plentiful and it will prepare us for all those unexpected and even scary events. All we have to do is notice that that bread is the fuel that we need. Amen.