“Uncertain Time”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 8, 2026

First Sunday of Extended Advent Psalm 70

Rev. Dr. John Wahl Matthew 25:1-13

Most people, including faithful Christians, consign talk about the “Last Days” or the “End Times” to the realm of the eccentric or deluded. After two-thousand years of expectant waiting for this “Second Coming” of Christ to earth, you might forgive followers of Jesus, like us, for harboring doubts about this “Day of the Lord.”

We don’t know what it will be like. We don’t know when it’s coming. We don’t know whether we should want it or dread it, or even how to prepare for it. Some of us may be unsure whether we believe there will be a day of the Lord at all. How can we hold our own uncertainty alongside our faith in Christ, who has promised to come again?

The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids opens with the familiar phrase, “The kingdom of heaven will be like this.” The kingdom is like the whole scene portrayed by this parable where some bridesmaids are prepared for the groom and enjoy the banquet; and others are excluded, apparently because of their lack of readiness.

In this story, it is expected that the bridesmaids would await the arrival of the bridegroom and greet him with a procession of light in the darkness. Presumably the bridesmaids are waiting at the brides’ home for the groom to come and fetch them to go to the home of the groom’s family where the wedding would take place. All the maids have either oil lamps or perhaps large torches. All wait with their lamps trimmed in eager expectation of the groom’s appearance. Like in the Boy Scouts, best to *be prepared*, we are told.[1]

The groom is delayed, so late that the bridesmaids fall asleep. When the groom finally shows, the young women are awakened to discover that only half of them have enough oil for their lamps. The oil-less bridesmaids ask their sisters to share. But the well-supplied bridesmaids refuse and tell the others to go and buy it for themselves!

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[1] Carla Works from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Where, exactly, do you buy oil in the middle of the night in ancient Israel? Is there a 24-hour Walmart? But the ones without oil go off, and after they purchase a supply, they arrive at the party only to have the bridegroom slam the door in their face and send them away like uninvited wedding crashers trying to get in.

Who does this? Nobody acts like this in real life! And it makes for a terrible picture of Jesus, the bridegroom. Where's the Jesus who turns five loaves of bread into a meal for 5,000? Or Jesus-the-Jew who knew that hospitality to strangers was the most important practice of his faith?

It is tempting to read this parable and to think that wise and foolish automatically means good and bad; as in, those who are prepared – both for the coming of the Lord and for what turns out to be a long delay – are judged as the better ones. Their ample supply of oil – whether it refers to the good works they do or represents that faith they possess – means that they are welcomed in, given salvation; but for those found lacking and unprepared, tragic outcomes await.

And yet, as author Diana Butler Bass points out, this parable seems more a comedy – akin to movies like *Bridesmaids* or *Wedding Crashers* – than some serious theological lesson. Maybe that is exactly what this parable is: farcical, funny. Maybe we are not meant to read it with a straight face.

It is hard to imagine that its first hearers *weren't* laughing! They, too, probably thought this sounded like the worst wedding ever. Who wants to go to a party where the groom is late and nasty to the guests? And where *is* that bride anyway? Maybe she doesn't even like the groom, or her bridesmaids. There's certainly no FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) here; this is one party for which you are glad you never got an invitation![2]

The point of the story revolves around the two words: "wise" and "foolish." In this story, "wise" is the word *phronimos,* meaning practical wisdom, shrewdness, savvy, being sensible or prudent. But there's another word for wisdom in biblical Greek, *sophia,* meaning divine wisdom, knowledge of sacred matters, insight to mystery. Matthew uses *sophia* just once in his book, when Jesus speaks of himself, saying: "the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and

[2] Diana Butler Bass from *The Cottage*

a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (11:19).

The "wise" bridesmaids here are *phronimos,* full of practical wisdom. They are shrewd. They brought flasks of oil to refill their lamps. But they aren't said to be *sophia,* attuned to the divine wisdom. After all, what do those practical bridesmaids get? They get to go to a party when they are exhausted, where there doesn't seem to be a bride, and the groom is, at best, uncouth. And they are locked in with him at this miserable affair in the wee hours of the night!

The ones left outside the door seem to wind up with the better end of the bargain. Think of some of Jesus' other stories about weddings and parties: the last will be first, don't invite your rich friends but instead invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." Did the "wise" bridesmaids, those full of common sense and practical wisdom, go to the wrong party with a bad bridegroom? Maybe the real party hadn't started yet! Sometimes *phronimos* isn't all it is cracked up to be.

There are two kinds of wisdom; one, a conventional, common-sense wisdom, that is really foolishness, and the other, "divine wisdom," that is the source of life and salvation. As much as we might think we need to be prepared, ready for whatever will come, sometimes we must live with the surprising uncertainties of life.

Jesus' telling of this parable suggests that he himself yearns to interrupt this narrative of certainty. After all, he preaches the parable of the bridal attendants in the last week of his life. He's peeked at the ending. He knows that he will be raised, that death will be conquered and the power of sin will be broken. Knowing all of this, he still preaches this parable, apparently meant to leave us guessing about the end. Jesus seems to be deliberately evoking uncertainty.

As in the other gospels, Matthew asserts that the kingdom of heaven, the Day of the Lord, will come unexpectedly – like a thief in the night – and that only God knows that day and the hour of its arrival. Some say that *it's never too late*, that though it may be late in the game, we must be vigilant and stay ready. Others may say, after these 2000 years, that *it's already too late*; that, surely, if God intended to act, it would have happened by now.

Uncertainty can help us find a point of balance between these two polar attitudes: that *it's never too late* on the one hand, and that *it's already too late* on the other.

We have surely known the feeling of *it's never too late*. It appears as denial, complacency, or desperation: like a dying person who refuses to write a will; or a spouse who will not hear the pleas of their partner for necessary change; or maybe a congregation that turns its focus inward and ignores engagement with its surrounding community.

We also know the sense of *it's already too late*. It appears as apathy, paralysis, or despair: it's the declining congregation that resists change because it cannot see the point; and the person whose experience of trauma has convinced them that nothing can be different; or the relationship that is withering because one party has decided it's over but hasn't yet left.

Uncertainty occupies a middle ground between these two ends of the spectrum: denial or desperation on one, apathy and despair on the other. When we admit that we cannot know what the future holds and we honestly acknowledge both the power of our choices and the limits of our influence, then the future – whether imagined as the biblical day of the Lord or as the welfare of a family or community – becomes something for God to enter, not something for us to control.[3]

Maybe this is what God calls us to understand and accept in this Advent season, while we wait and prepare for the coming of the Lord: to acknowledge how cultivating and living into uncertainty can be difficult but beautiful work. Sometimes, it is wise to get ourselves ready, to be prepared for whatever may come. But, maybe not at the cost of being so calculating and shrewd that we miss the wonders of divine mystery; that we won't live into the hope, faith, generosity, and love to which we might be called.

The uncertainty that Jesus offers does not nudge us toward paralysis or apathy but toward active participation in the world that God desires to shape. This is God's ministry of uncertainty: a ministry that makes a theological claim both upon the inevitability of what God has declared will happen *and* upon the undeniable impact of our active participation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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[3] Victoria Larsen, "The Uncertain Time" from *Barn Geese Worship*