“What is urgent in your heart?”

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Matthew 25:1-13; Psalm 70

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***Matthew 25:1-13***

***“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7Then all those young women got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet, and the door was shut. 11Later the other young women came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.***

***Psalm 70***

***Be pleased, O God, to deliver me.
    O Lord, make haste to help me!
2Let those be put to shame and confusion
    who seek my life.
Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor
    who desire to hurt me.
3Let those who say, “Aha, Aha!”
    turn back because of their shame.***

***4Let all who seek you
    rejoice and be glad in you.
Let those who love your salvation
    say evermore, “God is great!”
5But I am poor and needy;
    hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
    O Lord, do not delay!***

In the year 1900, Albert Einstein, at the age of 21, published his first paper on the Special Theory of Relativity, which taught us that time does not move at the same speed in every circumstance.

So what might Einstein make of our psalmist’s cry of “O Lord, make haste to help me,” and “hasten to me, O God.”? How fast would be fast enough? Einstein would say, it depends on the level of the crisis or calm. Time will move very slowly for the psalmist who is in crisis.

For this writer, gone are the typical words of praise and adulation toward God that usually come first in an address to God. Gone are the descriptions of the circumstances the writer is living. Gone even is the last words of a psalm, typically something like “I shall praise you forever.”

If you were drowning, you wouldn’t pray to God by first explaining that I think I’m drowning. There’s this boat over here, but I don’t think I can reach it. Gee I didn’t think the wind was this strong but the water is pretty rough and the shore is pretty far away. If you were drowning, you might assume God already knew the specifics, and you’d cry, “Help!” “Be pleased, O God, to deliver me O Lord, make haste to help me!” as the psalmist did in the very first line, getting right to the point. The psalm feels a little fragmented but that is because in a moment of need we don’t have time to make the words perfect, we just want to say “Help!” When something is urgent and we are in pain, our interactions are shorter.

This tiny psalm, not given a lot of air time for study, it is usually written off as an intro to Psalm 71, or neglected all together because these same lines are part of a longer Psalm 40. Reading Psalm 70 by itself, outside of it’s other contexts, really exaggerates the urgency expressed. Even after acknowledging the need for God, “I am poor and needy; you are my help and deliverer” still he writes “hasten to me” and “O Lord, do not delay!”

Urgency is a feeling many of the followers of Jesus felt. Today’s text from the 25th chapter of Matthew is an example of Jesus preparing his followers and the community to be ready for the coming kingdom of God. First, a little bit about weddings in Jesus’ time. Typically, “guests assembled at the house of the bride and were entertained by her parents while waiting for the groom. When the bridegroom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, light torches and went out to greet him. In a festive procession the entire party walked to the groom’s home where his parents were waiting for the ceremony and the extended banquet that would follow and continue for several days.”1

Could you imagine being the bride for that wedding, where the groom didn’t show up until midnight?! As it was, many of the guests fell asleep. When the groom did finally come, five of the bridesmaids did not have enough oil to keep their lamps shining during the procession. While they went out to get more, a fairly difficult proposition at that hour of night, they missed the party.

Keep awake. Pay attention. Be prepared. How were the bridesmaids to know how long they would have to wait, and how much oil to have ready? The text from Matthew today comes as a continuation of Jesus time in the temple with the authorities and leaders of the temple. In previous texts, Jesus has admonished the Pharisees, the scribes, and the Sadducees, all different members of the temple rulers. Expanding the parable for today to include the bridesmaids and the wedding scene, Jesus was expanding his teaching to the wider community. As time went by after Jesus’ death, communities of early followers had to try to adjust to the idea that Jesus did not return right away. No one knew really what a reasonable amount of time might be. We still don’t know.

What if we don’t worry about *that* time, and think more about *this* time.

One way to think about our current time has to do with the Matthew 25 text. In April of 2019, the Matthew 25 Initiative was started. An [invitation](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/matthew-25-sign-up-my-congregation/) went out for Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations and mid councils to declare themselves to be [Matthew 25](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A31-46&version=NRSV)churches. In doing that, they commit to working on at least one of the three emphases of the Presbyterian Mission Agency: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and ending systemic poverty. These three initiatives were chosen as an interpretation of Matthew 25:31-452, which we will read in a few weeks. *‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’****45****Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’* and conversely, when you did do it to one of the lease of these, you did it to him.

Today’s text gives us a good first step towards the work of the Matthew 25 Initiative. We can give some thought to what it might mean to live a life in preparation and readiness for the inbreaking of God into our lives as individuals and into our world.

Last week we talked about using our experiences and our memories to help us trust that God is working in our lives and in the world. We talked about building our memory banks by looking for places and circumstances where God has entered human history. When we remember that God has been and continues to break into human history, what are some of the ways we might live in such a way that we ourselves are part of God’s mission? How might we be prepared?

There are many ways in which we are already making preparations. We continue to look at ways for Bethany to be a better consumer of nature’s resources by trying to use solar power in our future, by recycling, by maximizing use of electricity. As individuals, many of you are already a part of organizations and have interests in groups who care for the planet. A sense of urgency for many of us. We continue to try to be carers of the people around us as we participate in the work of the Catholic Worker House in the feeding and clothing of their clients. Assisting the least of these is something we do right in our own back yard. We work for political changes by participating in volunteer activities in any way we can – we join with others in writing postcards to remind people to vote, we go to meetings, we volunteer to make phone calls. Another urgent priority for many of us. We make donations to groups that serve our interests around the world for peace – working toward what the bible calls “the peace that surpasses all understanding.”

When I imagine myself praying Psalm 70 with its urgent cries for deliverance without delay, I imagine I am the voice for those in devastating war zones in the middle east and in Ukraine and Russia, those living in the brutality of the Sudan, the voice of those struggling to survive unthinkable destruction at the whims of nature. Psalm 70 shows us that we can be honest and blunt when we look to God for help, not just for big world or nation issues, but for the very private individual fears and worries too, for ourselves and for others. All of it.

We can live in hope and with courage, because as the psalmist reminds us, God *is* our help and our deliverance from all that is troubling.

Amen.

1John M. Buchanan, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, pp. 284-6.

2Matthew 25:31-45

**31**“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. **32**All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, **33**and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. **34**Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, **35**for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36**I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ **37**Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38**And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? **39**And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ **40**And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ **41**Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, **42**for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43**I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ **44**Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ **45**Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’