

Wm. Blake Spencer Joshua 24:1-3a;14-25 Matthew 25:1-13 Prepare and Be Prepared

It was a day of choices, and decisions. The time of wandering had ended when they crossed the Jordan River and now fully inside the boundaries of God's promise the wandering people began a new kind of journey.....like hopping off one of those moving sidewalks at the airport....when your **feet and legs** feel as if they are still moving faster than the rest of your body....you know that feeling?

Well, the wanderers.... now settlers had some adjusting to do....their feet had to slow down to allow their hearts to catch up....they had some perspective to grasp. And it was Joshua who got their attention.

"It's time," Joshua boldly announced. "It is time to live what we've been saying we believe in. It's time to allow the promise and hope God has placed before us all these years to become a solid, rooted, permanent reality.....a promise that is real one that is part of our everyday lives.

It's time to let go of those things from our past....those things that have gotten in the way of our willingness to joyfully receive and also commit to the promise God has fulfilled. It is time."

Joshua was referring to certain distractions that had taken place along the journey.

We're all too familiar with the complaining in the wilderness, because their longings and hopes were and remain so familiar to us....all these generations later.

Also, prevalent was the lure of old belief systems centered upon hand-made idols: the gods and theologies from the land before Egypt, and in those days when they were held captive in Egypt..... as well those experiences along the way.....

gods and theologies having no correlation to the God of Abraham, the I am who I am God who had faithfully unfolded his love from **one** era to the next.

Joshua knew there were foreign gods and theologies yet to be encountered in the land they were about to call home and how important it was to have a moment of deep clarity and commitment as to what it meant to trust in and live the promise God had so freely given them.

It was an important moment.... to clear the air of all the distractions.....and there were many. We get clues as to Moses's exasperation along the way.

"O my God, how much longer! These people are like herding a bunch of cats....It is hard to keep their attention.....they won't cooperate, they won't focus, they keep wanting to go their own way!

Just as soon as we get started in the right direction half the group wants to exit to see the world's biggest ball of twine, or the three headed calf. "

(Pause)

So it is now Joshua who is the one called to provide focus and perspective.

"Come together people. Come here and listen. It's time. Focus for a minute. We cannot doubt what has been made so clear to us throughout the years. How many times will we allow our own fears and angst to get in our way?

What will it take for us to claim not only with our words....but with our resources, gifts, our talents, and our very lives that God has been loving and faithful and that we are grateful....and

that we are ready to put down the those things we long to cling to right now and do and live what we say we believe.

How much longer will we wait? We say....I'll get on board when this or that is in place....and yet, all the while God faithfully works and moves right where we are.

We say....I'm not going to make a decision until the future becomes more clear and I know what to expect.....and yet, all the while, God faithfully works and moves right where we are.

We say....not yet. I have to get some things in order first. And yet, all the while, God faithfully works and moves right where we are."

Like those before us....we place conditions on the journey....we build boxes around God and each other....and yes....even those of us who call ourselves progressive and open do this. We're human....and we are not always ready or willing to step into the unconditional reality of God's grace.

We are not always prepared to recognize how God is working in the here and now....and our lack of focus and commitment becomes the very distraction standing in our way of embracing God's love and call.

(Pause)

Again, this week.... we stand between two testaments of stories. On one side Joshua calls us to attention....encouraging us to look around right where we are and recognize the richness and power of God's presence. That right now....we need to offer our commitment with hearts of gratitude.....that right now we need to lift up our resources, time and talents to build up the kingdom of God in this place and time.

And on the other side a parable....a story told that we might ponder what it means to be ready, what it means to serve with joy, what it means to show up fully prepared to go where God is calling us....and to do what God is nudging us to do.

The parable is the story of a wedding. Tom Wright tells it this way: "The guests had all arrived and were seated. The organ was playing. The bridegroom and the best man had been there half an hour in advance. The photographers were waiting. The flowers had all been beautifully arranged. The choir had practiced their anthems. And the bride.....was nowhere to be seen.

Since I was supposed to be performing the service that day....*Tom writes*..... I went out of the church, and round the corner on the street. Then I saw her. Her car was stuck in traffic a few hundred feet away.

Eventually she and her bridesmaids had decided to walk. They were coming down the street. I stepped out into the road, in my full clerical robes, and held up traffic. Cars hooted their horns. People waved and shouted 'good luck'. And we began the service a full 15 minutes late."

In every culture there are different ways of celebrating a wedding, and despite the many differences there are always risks of getting it wrong.

Oh the stories I've heard and experienced along the way....groomsmen fainting, flower arrangements falling over, wardrobe malfunctions, ring bearers and flower girls making up their own journey down the middle aisle, family dynamics erupted at the wrong moment.

Despite cultural differences there are so many reasons a wedding can unfold in an unexpected way. The parable Jesus speaks offers a contrast of being ready or not being ready. Without becoming overly complicated with the symbolic meanings of the details in this story.....or what this story really stands for.....the basic message is simple. Either we are prepared or not.

It is also important to say.....that not being prepared doesn't imply the ultimate consequence of banishment or exile from God's saving grace....

I believe this story is simply painting a picture of what life can or cannot be for us in the here and now. We either busy ourselves with menial tasks and transactions or we open ourselves to transformation.

We prepare our hearts and minds to be molded and remolded by the life giving breath of God....or we move about the halls of the church so burdened and blinded by the tangle we can't sense or experience God's moving in the here and now....God's availability and ability to both heal and inspire.

Like all parables Jesus shares.....they are meant to be lived. With this in mind we are the ones now called to prepare and be ready. Our oil lamps in this moment and time come in the shape and form of pledge cards.....the invitation to bring what we have and to offer it with gratitude to God as a gift with the expectation that God will transform us.

The act of pledging is an act of commitment.....the acceptance of God's invitation to live into peace, hope and life.

When we define the act of pledging as a transaction then we miss the point all together. Offering our money, gifts, talents and time is not a transaction to buy something or to get some tangible benefit or asset.....it is the way we open our lives to God's transformative work. **We give up, we offer too, we share....and when we do we.....like the bridesmaids who were ready with their offering of oil and light.....like the bridesmaids who were prepared and because of their readiness enjoyed every moment of the occasion.....we too enjoy to the fullest what God has already created and provided for us.**

We accept God's invitation to come closer. Follow me and come closer. Put down and let go of and come closer to me. Offer your gifts and discover the depth of joy and life God has already prepared.