

Matthew 25:1-13      24th Sunday after Pentecost      Nov. 14, 1993

*Amos 5:18-24* 18Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; 19as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. 20Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? 21I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

*Matthew 25:1-13* “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids 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 bridesmaids 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 bridesmaids 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.

I've heard the story told, maybe some of you can tell it, of coming home to the place of your security and finding an intruder was there - an uninvited guest has entered your home, scattered what is yours - your treasures lost to you forever, some broken, some stolen.

“My whole life is shaken,” the victim says. “I don't feel safe anywhere. I wonder when it will happen again. I can't get over the thought of a stranger handling my most intimate belongings. I am no longer at peace, feeling safe.”

We all need a place to be safe. Secure.

For many of us in the hands of God is our place of safety. We rest ourselves in the promises of God. We may not know what intruder will enter our life this day, whether it be disease or loss, or shame. But we know who will be our rock and refuge, who will be our dwelling place.

Yet this morning God's own word becomes the thief who breaks in, stealing our security.

“Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light.”

“O that God would come to set things right,”

We pray: “Your kingdom come.”

Yet the prophet Amos told the people of his day that when the Lord comes it will be like fleeing from a lion, running as hard as you can, in panic, and in the very moment of relief, a bear rises in your path to tear you to shreds.

Like going into the house, a place secure, giving a big sigh, safe at last, resting a hand against a wall, and being bitten by a poisonous snake.

What if the Lord when he comes, comes to punish me?

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs: I will not listen to the melody of your harps.”

What if all that we do here, our praises, our parading, our pride are only an irritation to our God? What if our loveless moments are remembered, the edges and corners of our lives that we offer to God trimmed off and thrown away.

Through the prophet the Lord spoke this word to us: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Can you picture Niagara Falls, the roaring of waters, tons of waters pouring out? Can you picture justice pouring out of our lives like that, not a trickle good deeds, but a stream of love and mercy and sharing flowing from our hearts?

I can picture that, but only in my dreams. Most often only a brackish stream flows from me, polluted waters, stagnant.

Or take the picture Jesus sketches: Ten young girls, watching waiting for the time of night when the bridegroom will appear and they will light his path to the banquet hall. Ten virgins dressed for the wedding celebration - fresh, pure, innocent, like the people of God full of hope and expectation for God's visitation. But five were not ready for the long wait. They ran out of oil for their lamps just at the moment the bridegroom arrived. The five who were prepared would not share. So five were part of the joy and celebration, five others were locked out. They waited all night, but they were not ready.

Is that me, Lord?

Is my existence going to end with me on the outside, the door shut, you saying you never knew me? Lord, I thought I could count on you, are you saying that I can't? Will you end up being a poisonous snake to me, a bear devouring me, enraged at how I have wasted the precious life you have given?

Before long, the very ones who heard Jesus speaking this parable of the wise and foolish virgins would be seated around a table. They were the ones who had left home and family and possessions for Jesus. Yet at that table, hearing that one of them would betray him, they asked one after another: "Is it I, Lord?"

And one did end up outside, the door shut. Judas took his own life in despair over what he had done.

Could you or I be lost to God?

If the answer is yes, then there is no secure place for us, no home where we may be at rest. We must be on guard, seeking with our whole life to enter that great banquet hall.

But we must also remember there were eleven others around that table with Judas and Jesus that night. Eleven others who ran away, who denied their Lord, whose lamps ran out of oil.

And the same Jesus who told of five foolish virgins being left outside, opened the door for eleven foolish disciples.

What can we say of all of this? Never give up hope in Jesus as Judas did.

When you are sure you've got a front row seat reserved in that banquet hall, God may take a pin and burst the balloon of your pride.

But if you are pretty sure the door will be closed on you, remember Jesus whose love for you is deeper than death, and more certain. Remember Jesus whose last words to you will be, "Slaughter the best calf, put rings on her fingers and shoes on her feet, my child who was lost is found."