

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some surprises in life are nice. But some surprises can leave you disheartened. Still, some of those disappointing surprises can be good for us and open us to better things.

The chief surprise I want to speak of in this sermon is the surprise of the five foolish maidens who were left outside the marriage banquet. But I think we can also see two other cases of surprise in today's Bible readings. Let me speak briefly of them before turning to the wise and foolish maidens.

There is a verse in today's Psalm that sometimes passes right on by our attention. But let me point to it now. It speaks of a reversal of fortunes. Verse 3 in Psalm 70 goes this way:

³Let those who say to me "Aha!" and gloat over me turn back,
because they are ashamed. (Psalm 70:3, LBW)

The Psalmist is low in spirit. People are being hard on him. They gloat over his troubles. So, the Psalmist prays that things will change. Indeed, he prays that things will change so much that those folks who previously gloated over his troubles will find themselves now to be ashamed. The Psalmist is praying for a surprise — for a fundamental reevaluation of things so that those who used to rejoice in the misery of the Psalmist will now realize that they were wrong. He prays for the surprise that will open the eyes of his opponents. He is not praying for their destruction, but rather for their conversion. He prays that they will come to see things better. I think it is a good prayer for us if ever we should feel that people are rejoicing over our troubles. Let them be surprised by how well things work out for us by God's grace.

The other case of surprise in our Old Testament readings is the remarkable passage in Amos. Here, it is not a lone, suffering Psalmist who prays for a surprise, but a whole people who are headed for a terrible surprise unless they repent. The issue is the Day of the LORD. The people of Israel figure that the Day of the LORD will be a great day for them. They assume that it will be a day of victory for them. But Amos tells them that it will not be so. At least, it will not be so unless they repent and seek justice and righteousness in the land.

The verse I especially love is the one about the bear. It goes this way:

¹⁸Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why would you have the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, and not light;
¹⁹as if a man fled from a lion,
and a bear met him; (Amos 5:18-19, RSV)

When our boys were young and we would take them to the Natural History Museum, I would hasten to the big Alaskan brown bear and admire it. I would try to get the boys to admire it too, but they seemed unimpressed. They just took it in stride. In fact, young David seemed to prefer the walruses, for some reason. But not me. I would gaze at that great bear and try to imagine running into it in the wild. So, that is what Amos is warning Israel about. The people think that the Day of the LORD is going to be great. But instead, Amos says that it going to be like fleeing from a lion only to meet a bear. A disaster! The prophet warns the people that all of their ceremony and liturgy is not going to help them. There is no substitute for justice in the land. And so we come to the beautiful concluding line in our reading from Amos. The LORD says this:

²³Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
²⁴But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:23-24, RSV)

Now, that will be nice: on this old world of ours, to have justice and righteousness rolling down like an everflowing stream. There are springs like that — springs that seem never to run dry, not even in the worst of droughts. So the Lord wants it to be and will require it to be: that justice and righteousness shall flow in an unceasing way.

Now, let me shift to the five wise and the five foolish maidens. There is coming a time — and may God bring it soon — when each of us is going to be surprised. We are going to be astonished, for a mighty scene shall unfold before our eyes. St. Paul speaks of it in this morning's Epistle Lesson:

¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven... (1 Thessalonians 4:16, RSV)

Then things shall not go as usual. Then shall follow either delight or dismay, depending on whether we have oil in our lamps.

St. John Chrysostom felt that it was important to the interpretation of the parable of the wise and foolish maidens to have a realistic grasp of the oil. What is the oil in this parable of the wise and foolish maidens? Chrysostom himself felt that it was almsgiving. He believed that what ailed the five foolish

maidens is that though they might have been good people in general, they fell short in generosity. No criminal complaint could be brought against them. It was just that they failed to have compassion on their poor and suffering neighbors. Almsgiving was a big deal in ancient days when folks did not have the social welfare systems that we have. If neighbors were not kind to the poor, to the widows, and the orphans, those poor people could very well go wanting. To use a phrase from our Confession service, the trouble with the foolish maidens is the good they could have done but “left undone.” Then the bridegroom comes, the door is shut, and the solemn words are spoken to them:

Truly, I say to you, I do not know you. (Matthew 25:12, RSV)

We are talking about Jesus. We are talking about the cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, and with Jesus coming again to be this world’s everlasting King. Jesus is warning us that we will be excluded if we do not have our oil.

This parable puts me in mind of a saying by our friend theologian Sarah Hinlicky Wilson. She said that St. Paul is a “big softie. The One we really need to worry about is Jesus.” In our evening Bible class, we have been studying Paul for a couple years now. By golly, I think Sarah is right. St. Paul preaches a glorious form of the gospel. And yet, I am quite certain that the Apostle himself would want us to interpret his words by way of the story of Jesus. And this story of Jesus includes his warnings about the door being closed.

This is a serious matter. In fact, it is so serious that I think we should press beyond Chrysostom’s thoughts about the oil. He felt that the oil was almsgiving. I think we had best expand the idea to include the larger category of half-hearted discipleship... lukewarm following of Jesus. It is like that great saying in the book of Revelation — the solemn words of Jesus to the church in La-odice’a:

¹⁵I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:15-16, RSV)

So, this sermon urges you and me to burn more warmly for Christ. And it is a plea against presumption. I am speaking of our lives and of our eternity. Let us not simply presume that we will make it to heaven with no problems and with no questions asked. Ten respectable maidens were invited to the banquet. Only five of them made it. Jesus is our Saviour. There can be doubting of that. And yet, this parable holds open the possibility that our

great encounter with our Savior might be hard for us. It has something to do with our oil.

For me, the crucial Bible story putting together the scriptural convictions that Jesus is both our Judge *and* our Savior is the reconciliation scene between Jesus and Peter at the end of St. John's Gospel (John 21). Easter has happened. Jesus is risen from the dead. Now Jesus confronts the man who swore that he would never deny Jesus and yet denied him nonetheless — indeed, denied him three times. Peter does not seem sheepish to be facing Jesus. Peter puts on a brave face. He declares that he loves Jesus. But clearly, this is not an easy encounter between Jesus and Peter. Peter grieves as his conversation with Jesus goes along. And this is Peter! A good man! A better man than I will ever be. The thing that had to be dwelt with in that great encounter between Jesus and Peter is the reality that, for a while, Peter's oil ran out. For a while, Peter waxed lukewarm in his following of Jesus. Indeed, he had abandoned Jesus to his fate. In this encounter, Jesus remains the Saviour that he is. He does not destroy or even reject Peter. But the form of his salvation is to get Peter back on track. And that is not an easy-going process. I bet Peter wished he had never denied his Lord. The coming of the Day of the Lord might be a real bear for us too unless we burn more warmly for Jesus.

Luther gives us the great principle of our daily life. We are to put the old Adam and the old Eve to death each day and rise up as a new person, to live before God in righteousness and purity forever (Luther, *Small Catechism*, "The Sacrament of Holy Baptism.") So, that is the general principle: put to death our old selves and rise up to be better people. The adventure of our daily walk with Jesus is to apply this general principle to the daily things of life.

Suppose our tongues are too sharp, for example. Shall we use the tongue that receives this Blessed Sacrament to belittle people for whom our Lord was willing to die? Shall we add to the divisions in our world by failing to even try to see the other side? No, to be wise men and maidens, we should use our words in more loving ways.

Suppose we have been drinking too much. Well, cut it out. We do not want to be drunk as we follow Jesus, stumbling and wandering all around.

Suppose we have been hard-hearted toward people on the sidewalks who are struggling. Our oil has run low. At least say a prayer for them. And do not frown at them.

Suppose we have been hopping onto the cross-town bus without paying our fare. Lots of people do that. But not you and me. The transportation system deserves our fare and this world needs good examples of integrity. Especially if we wear a cross or a clergy collar, we should try to give a good witness to Jesus.

Suppose we have been mean and short-tempered with our families or colleagues or anyone? Well, for all we know, the call of the archangel and the sounding of the trumpet is going to happen today. Let us live this day as being

worthy of our Lord's return. Let us seek the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, including gentleness and patience (Galatians 5).

You and I are the ones who get to think out for ourselves in a thousand different ways what today's oil should be. And so, we are ones with the right and the responsibility to be ready for the coming of the Bridegroom, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.