

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | NOVEMBER 12, 2023

AMOS 5:18-24 | PSALM 70 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 | MATTHEW 25:1-13

There's no time. Many of the New Testament writers—the early St. Paul in particular—are convinced of it. Jesus is coming back soon. And by “soon” they mean not “sometime in the near future.” They mean something more like “next Tuesday.” In today's reading from 1 Thessalonians for example, Paul memorably describes how Jesus will “with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet... descend from heaven.” You get the sense that he doesn't mean this as a metaphor.¹

Two thousand years later, these writers' belief that Jesus's dramatic return was imminent may lead us to shake our heads, roll our eyes, or just ignore these readings altogether.² But it's worth sticking with these stories for at least a couple of reasons.

One is that the earliest believers were writing under an immense amount of pressure. That helps us understand some of the advice that the New Testament contains.³ Paul's suggestion, for example, that unmarried people stay unmarried makes a lot more sense in this context. Marriage isn't bad. But if Jesus is about to return, what's the point? This is also part of the reason the New Testament writers have such a harsh perspective on wealth. If Jesus is coming back next week, what's the point of putting money in a 401k?

But there's another, more personal reason to hear these texts. Because as strange as we might find those first believers, they would certainly find us equally odd. Our problem is not that we think we have no time. It's our belief that we have so much time.

That's also what's at the heart of the parable that Jesus tells today. Jesus tells us about ten bridesmaids getting ready to go to a wedding. Five took oil with them, five did not. When the groom was delayed, they fell asleep. So when he finally arrived, they missed the party. The wise brought oil. The foolish didn't. The wise were prepared. The foolish weren't. The problem here seems to be less about oil itself than the bridesmaids' belief that they could get more oil later.

Foolishness, for Matthew's Jesus, is thinking that we have all the time in the world. And that the real work, the real meaning, the real opportunities are off in some distant future. But when we load up all the world's meaning in the future, we miss the ways that we can act faithfully and live graciously now.

There's an old bishop that I think about a lot. His name was Charles Carpenter, and he was the Episcopal bishop in Alabama for three decades starting in the 1930s. And he was a complicated figure for reasons that we don't have time to get into. Carpenter was more progressive on civil rights than you might expect just looking at his biography, but he thought that changes were happening too quickly. A good idea in theory, but the wrong timeline in practice. Reportedly, he once told Ralph Abernathy that civil rights were a good idea that would take fifty years or so.⁴

¹ There's a quick discussion of Paul's evolution on this in Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul: Reflections for the Season of Lent* (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2015), 80. 1 Corinthians 15 is an example of a later treatment of this.

² Christ's second coming is called the parousia, and it's delay is a source of consternation in much of the NT. Some Protestants deal with the parousia by collapsing it into Jesus's presence in the sacraments or service to the poor. We're not going to get into that discussion today, but it's good to be aware of.

³ There's a very interesting discussion of this in the introduction of David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (Yale University Press, 2023).

⁴ Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (University of Alabama Press, 1999), 338.

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So when MLK planned a protest in Birmingham, Carpenter got a group of clergy together and wrote an open letter asking them not to wait. Not because their complaints were wrong, but because it was “untimely.” And even if you don’t know Bishop Carpenter, you probably know how King responds. It’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”⁵ And in the course of just eviscerating Carpenter’s reasoning, King also drops in this great line. Everything in Carpenter’s letter, he writes, “grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills.”

Carpenter’s failure to read the moment calls to mind the bridesmaids in today’s gospel reading who believe that they can always grab some oil later. But when the groom arrives and the party begins, they’re left standing outside the banquet.

If our ability to love and serve effectively is contingent on our ability to time things perfectly, to know the exact day and hour when our skills will meet the world’s needs, to sense the one moment of our lives when we really have a chance to make a difference, then God help us. We’re probably going to end up like the bridesmaids on the outside looking in. Or like Bishop Carpenter wondering why we missed our big chance.

But this isn’t how we live our vocations in the world, of course. We don’t know the exact day or the exact hour when our actions make a difference. And the truth is we don’t need to. Because every hour of every day is an opportunity to participate in God’s mission of renewing and healing creation.

I’m always struck that when we do a baptism, we end by welcoming the newly baptized into the body of Christ and the mission we share. And that begins now. Right then. We don’t say, *You can participate in God’s mission later when you get confirmed.* Or *You can love your neighbors later once when you grow up.* Or *You’re the future of the church.* Since our participation in God’s mission comes through our baptisms, our vocations of service begin at that very moment. Not later. Now.

It’s the same for those of us who are a few years past our baptisms. It can be so easy for us to push life off into the future, to always focus on the next thing. Once I have this thing, this job, this relationship, this credential, this position, this experience, whatever it is, once I have that, then I can do stuff that really matters.

But wisdom is not just doing more or planning ahead or pushing “real life” into the future. Wisdom is understanding the significance of what we do now. Becoming aware of the ways in which we love and serve as the body of Christ.

Because what makes our service in the present meaningful is not simply the good that it does for others but also the love of God that it conveys. Even seemingly insignificant acts can become deeply meaningful when they are done in God’s service. When we recognize that God’s great love has called us not just over there in the future but also here and now.

There may be future versions of our selves may be able to perform acts of compassion that are more impressive or acts of care that are more mature or acts of service that are better planned. But there is no future version of our selves that can reflect more of God’s love into the world than we can right now.

To go through life waiting for the perfect moment to serve is a fool’s errand. But to see God’s love poured out in and through us is the fullness of wisdom.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁵ I believe the white clergy letter was titled “A Call for Unity.” You can find full texts of all this online. “LfaBJ” was written on magazine scraps, if I remember correctly.