

“Finding Help”

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Genesis 21:9-21

Matthew 25:1-13

But at midnight there was a cry,

‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’

Matthew 25:6

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to be ready by anticipating life’s challenges.

But even if we don’t, help us anyway!

Amen

Our Gospel lesson today of the parable of the ten maidens

is also called the parable of the ‘ten virgins’,

‘five of them were wise and five were foolish’.

I had considered entitling my sermon, “Extra Virgin Oil”,

but didn’t think that would work so well on our marquee street sign

and that passersby would not get the reference.

This particular story seems to be straightforward about anticipating problems
and being responsible to prepare for them –

like preparing for hurricanes... or climate change, for that matter.

Quite a few years ago, I heard theologian Megan McKenna teach a different
perspective for understanding this parable.

She challenged us not to assume God is necessarily the same as the authority figure
in Jesus’ parables – like a king, a landowner, or in this case a bridegroom.

She suggested that Third World people would hear this story in terms
of how often the door of opportunity is often shut in their face

when they lacked the resources they needed.

This story also acknowledges the determination of Third World people

to find those resources, just as those five ‘*virgins*’ – those five women,

were still able to find that *extra oil*, even after everything was closed.

Finding the help we need – that is a tricky concept in the life of faith,
because sometimes we don’t.

I am of the opinion that even then there is something to be learned,
and we are never truly abandoned.

When the grace of God shows up in dramatic ways,

we certainly do remember such times with wonder and gratitude.

Perhaps the challenge is when we are in a dry and desolate place emotionally
that we need to remember the routine grace of how

things actually *do work out for us*, on a regular basis.

Willard, p.2

This being Veterans Day Sunday, I will share an example from my time in the Army about such a grace-event that became a routine blessing.

I was a commo officer for a mechanized infantry battalion in West Germany in the late 1970s, responsible for communications maintenance and repair.

Part of our inventory was a secure radio-teletype installed in a tracked vehicle – which was a kind of tank, but without a turret.

It was an awkward thing that would go out of alignment just crossing the motor pool, which is what we called the parking lot for our military vehicles.

We rarely expected this radio-teletype equipment, called a RATT rig, to work, but our new division commander insisted on each battalion communicating during the next field exercise.

So beforehand, we sent the radio and teletype components to our brigade maintenance mechanics, to be checked out and tuned.

But by the time we were to go on the exercise, the security scrambler device was still not working.

We were already deployed to the field on the night before the exercise was to begin, when SFC Vidal of our training operations section told me that there was a sergeant at the training command center who was an expert at fixing this kind of equipment – and he was waiting to be picked up.

So, I hopped in the jeep and found him waiting with no hat, no tool box, just self-confidence, saying,

‘There’s no magic to these things, Lieutenant!’

Sure enough, he worked on it for an hour with little more than a tuning fork and a Swiss army knife – and got it working!

‘There’s no magic to these things, Lieutenant!’ he said, and I began to believe it.

Our RATT rig came up on the radio net and passed teletype traffic with brigade, and from then on, we *always* came up on the brigade net.

This seemed like kind of a miracle, but more so because of the pride our operators now took in maintaining it –

and if there ever were any problems, they got fixed.

Part of that lesson for me was that you can solve just about anything.

‘If there is a will, there is a way’ – If there is a will to find

the person, part, or tool to help, you can solve just about anything.

But I also saw this as a beginning for an ongoing practical dialogue with God – that after you do all you can do – to do your part, then you leave it up to God to provide a way through difficult circumstances.

Now the US Army has a good system that is well-resourced, which made me wonder how this might work in the civilian world.

I have since come to believe that Planet Earth is well-stocked with what we need, but the problem for most human beings continues to be in achieving fair access to those resources.

Willard, p.3

While on the “road trip” phase of my sabbatical this summer,
I had the opportunity to visit theologian Phyllis Tribble
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

She was a member of the museum and directed me to see some of her favorites
among the classic works of art there, including “Hagar in the Wilderness”
by the French painter, Corot [show slide].

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/38.64/>

Dr. Tribble is renowned as one of the most important feminist theologians of our time,
so this painting had particular significance for me about her.

It portrays Hagar having been driven out into the desert
by Sarah’s jealousy and Abraham’s abandonment, crying out to God in despair.
Yet this is also the same moment that the Angel of God shows up
not only to show Hagar the source of water to save her and her baby, Ishmael,
but also to give her the promise for a future ahead.

Dr. Tribble also made a point to show me the Renaissance sculpture of “Adam”
by Tullio Lombardo, carved in marble, standing 6 foot 3 and a half inches tall
and weighing 770 pounds.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/197822>

One of the things that most impressed me when I first heard Dr. Tribble speak
about feminist theology, was how she used reading between the lines
along with some humor to re-interpret the Genesis story of Adam & Eve.

In so doing, she re-affirmed for me the capacity for Biblical scripture
to withstand inquiry like digging for treasure and finding gold.

A feminist view of this story has Eve as the first theologian,
interpreting God’s words as she engaged in dialogue with the snake,
while Adam simply took a bite out the apple that Eve handed him,
without so much as asking her where it came from.

As a side note, Dr. Tribble also pointed out that the root word meaning
of the name ‘Adam’ was... ‘dirt’.

Feminist joking aside, Dr. Tribble was very proud of this remarkable sculpture –
which had fallen from its pedestal in 2002 and was catastrophically shattered!
Yet despite this literal ‘fall’, this huge sculpture of Adam was completely restored
with-no-visible-cracks, no-scars, no-brokenness...

<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2014/tullio-lombardo-adam>

This says a lot about the technical capabilities and resourcefulness of human beings,
the pliable properties that God had given to marble and its potential for repair,
as well as the grace of one of the greatest feminist theologians
to appreciate the restoration of this symbol of the original Man.

Willard, p.4

If we read the scriptures from the perspective that God favors the vulnerable,
then it helps us see how God is moving in our time –
especially through the advocacy of women.

This is already in progress within our society – and throughout the world,
as women are saying, ‘#metoo’ and not only to break their silence
about the injustices of male domination,
but to claim their right as equal partners, and say,
“Deal me in, too!”

In the process, all minorities – along with straight males of every complexion,
will benefit as the culture of violence is challenged
and human dignity is lifted up in all its diversity.
The oppressor along with the oppressed, will be freed.

In closing, Genesis 21:17 tells us:

*When God heard the boy crying,
the angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven and said,
“Hagar, why are you worried? Don’t be afraid.
I have heard your son crying.”*

So, God hears the wordless cries of the child within us,
and calls to the adult that we are, saying,
“Don’t be afraid.

There’s no arbitrary ‘magic’ to this life.
The world still operates by ‘cause and effect’
and I will provide you with what you need.
Just do your part.”

Amen

*Our lesson from Genesis 21:9-21 using the Common English Version,
tells about the tension between Sarah and Hagar and
whose child would be Abraham's heir.
Hagar and her son are sent away, but their relationship with God continues...*

- ⁹⁻¹⁰ One day, Sarah noticed Hagar's son Ishmael playing, and she said to Abraham,
"Get rid of that Egyptian slave woman and her son!
I don't want him to inherit anything. It should all go to my son."
¹¹ Abraham was worried about Ishmael. ¹² But God said,
"Abraham, don't worry about your slave woman and the boy.
Just do what Sarah tells you. Isaac will inherit your family name,
¹³ but the son of the slave woman is also your son,
and I will make his descendants into a great nation."
¹⁴ Early the next morning
Abraham gave Hagar an animal skin full of water and some bread.
Then he put the boy on her shoulder and sent them away.
They wandered around in the desert near Beersheba,
¹⁵ and after they had run out of water, Hagar put her son under a bush.
¹⁶ Then she sat down a long way off,
because she could not bear to watch him die. And she cried bitterly.
¹⁷ When God heard the boy crying,
the angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven and said,
"Hagar, why are you worried? Don't be afraid.
I have heard your son crying.
¹⁸ Help him up and hold his hand,
because I will make him the father of a great nation."
¹⁹ Then God let her see a well. So she went to the well and filled the skin with water,
then gave some to her son.
²⁰⁻²¹ God blessed Ishmael, and as the boy grew older,
he became an expert with his bow and arrows.
He lived in the Paran Desert,
and his mother chose an Egyptian woman for him to marry.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 25:1-13

[Jesus said,]

- ¹“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.
² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.
³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them;
⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.
⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.
⁶ But at midnight there was a cry,
‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’
⁷ Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps.
⁸ And the foolish said to the wise,
‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’
⁹ But the wise replied,
‘Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you;
go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’
¹⁰ And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came,
and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast;
and the door was shut.
¹¹ Afterward the other maidens came also, saying,
‘Lord, lord, open to us.’
¹² But he replied,
‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’
¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.