

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“ARE YOU PREPARED”  
Matthew 25:1-13  
November 9, 2008  
8:45 AM Service**

There's an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip where Calvin says to Hobbes: **“Live for the moment is my motto. You never know how long you got. You could step into the road tomorrow and WHAM, you get hit by a cement truck! Then you'd be sorry you put off your pleasures. That's what I say--live for the moment.”** Then he asks Hobbes, **“What's your motto?”**

Hobbes replies: **“My motto is ‘Look down the road.’”**

One of the most important and persistent questions throughout life is, Are you prepared? Are you **“looking down the road.”**? I am sure that is the question on the mind of Barack Obama and perhaps all of America this morning. Are you ready for the issues at hand?

We might ask of a child, is she prepared to begin the first grade? Does she have the requisite social skills? Does she recognize her letters and numbers? Later we might ask of a teenager, is he prepared for his driver's exam? Or, is she prepared for college? How about this one, is he really prepared to have a family? Is she really prepared to be a mother?

The question keeps popping up. Are you prepared for that job interview? Is your résumé in order? Are you properly dressed? Are you ready to buy that first house? Do you know your FICO score? Do you have enough for a down payment? Later, still, are you prepared for retirement? Do you have enough in savings? Are you prepared emotionally for the feelings that accompany retirement?

It's a question that follows us throughout our life experience. Are you prepared? Are you prepared in case there is an accident? Are you prepared for disappointment or failure? And at the end of life, we might ask--as do those billboards found in some parts of our land--are you prepared to meet your Maker? It's a question that we might want to avoid, but if we want to be successful in life, we cannot. Are you prepared?

Jesus told a parable from common, everyday life. He said the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young women who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now, this may require some explanation. In Jesus' culture, weddings had some rather distinct features. The groom and his family would gather at their household while the bride and her family and guests gathered at her household. Then the groom and his family would make their way to the bride's house to collect the bride. It would be late in the evening when the groom would arrive to escort the bride to his father's house. Last minute haggling between the groom and his father-in-law over the dowry was commonplace. Such haggling symbolized the esteemed value of the bride, but many times delayed the wedding. When both parties agreed upon the dowry, the groom would lead the wedding party back to his father's house for the ceremony and reception.

The wedding party would take the longest route to their home. The more houses they visited, the more well-wishes and gifts they received. Along the way there would be much jovial visiting and vibrant hospitality. As a result, no one ever knew when the couple would show up at their home, where the final festivities occurred. (1)

Now perhaps we can understand why the ten young women were awaiting the arrival of the groom. All the preliminaries would be over and the wedding party might be returning to the groom's house quite late. For security reasons, once the doors were shut to the groom's house, they would not be reopened. If the young women were not there, ready to go inside when the groom arrived, they would miss the festivities.

Well, five of the young women planned ahead and five of them did not. Jesus called the latter young women, "*foolish.*" The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: ***“Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”***

Then the young women woke up and began to trim their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ***“Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.”***

***“No,”*** the prepared young women replied, ***“there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.”***

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The young women who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

Later the other young women returned to the groom’s house. The door was bolted shut. ***“Sir! Sir!”*** they said. ***“Open the door for us!”*** But it was too late. Then Jesus added these important words, ***“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”***

The meaning of our text for today is clear: There are people who will miss the Kingdom of Heaven because they are not prepared. Are you prepared?

Life is full of the unexpected. A woman came in from work and said to her husband, ***“I don’t want to upset you, but I put a scratch on the left rear fender of my car.”*** Her husband replied, ***“That doesn’t sound too bad.”*** She said, ***“It’s not. If you want to look at it, it’s in the trunk.”***

No one intends for accidents to happen, but they do. No one intends for terminal illnesses to occur, but they do. No one intends for layoffs to occur, or bankruptcies, or stock market downturns. Life is filled with unexpected, unintended, sometimes disastrous events.

In his book *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner writes of his childhood, a time when everything was carefree and full of hope. Then, when he was ten, his father committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning. Frederick and his brother James saw the body on the driveway as their mother and grandmother tried frantically to revive their father. The event had a lasting impact on Frederick, as you might imagine. His life

shattered. Nothing made sense anymore. He struggled to accept the fact that his father was no longer with them even as he struggled to understand the reason behind his father's actions.

That moment changed Buechner's life forever. It was a defining moment. He described it as **“the first tick of the clock that measures everything into before and after.”** Everything in his life was measured against this pivotal moment. Now he knew bad things could happen when you least expect them to. (2)

Life is full of the unexpected. The parent of every teenager with a driver's license is aware of the risk involved. Many of us in the middle and later years of life are becoming aware of friends who are dying untimely deaths because of cancer and heart attacks. And, we wonder, could I be next? Life is fragile and there are no guarantees of success or happiness for any of us. And that is true regardless of the depth of our religious commitment.

God sends his rain on both the just and the unjust. David Jeremiah tells about a woman named Ivory Wilderman. Ivory returned to her doctor one day to learn the results of a biopsy. **“Did you come alone?”** he asked, and she knew the news was not good. The tests had shown breast cancer.

Ivory's forty-six and up to this point things had been going great. A new job, a new apartment, a new car; and, best of all, a new relationship that could lead to marriage! Ivory felt God's blessing upon her life. **“I wanted to press the pause button and just enjoy the moment I was in,”** she says looking back.

Unfortunately life has no pause button. The specialists gave Ivory no more than a 20 percent chance of survival. Her fear felt like suffocation. **“It was as if a great plastic bag were being fastened around my head,”** she explains. **“There was nothing to do,”** she says, **“but to call out the name of Jesus.”** (3)

That, of course, was the wisest thing she could do, but you and I need to be reminded sometimes that our religious commitment is no protection from the unexpected. All of us are vulnerable. Life has played cruel jokes on far better persons than we are. And so I ask again: Are you prepared? This is where we can rely upon our faith.

There is an old story about an elderly man who had just taken his first airplane ride. His family was waiting for him when he got off the plane, and they asked him if he had enjoyed the flight.

**“To tell you the truth,”** he replied, **“I didn’t put my full weight down on that seat the whole trip.”** Well, we know what he meant. He felt he never could relax.

Now that the election is over, it’s time for us to let our full weight down on our seat. That is the best preparation for whatever life may bring us. We need to learn to trust in God so much that we are able to say with the Old Testament figure Job, who experienced every imaginable catastrophe, ***“I know that my Redeemer lives” (19:25)***. This rarely happens overnight. It usually develops from a lifetime of trusting God in all kinds of situations. It comes from having a deep reservoir of scripture and experience of God in prayer to draw on. It comes from years of living for God and testifying to God in all kinds of circumstances.

Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old. She was born just a generation past slavery. She grew up picking cotton. The hands that picked cotton picked the next president of the United States of America.

St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:23-25: ***“I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”***

Are you prepared? Are you prepared for life? Are you prepared for death? Are you prepared for disappointments and heartbreaks and everything that goes with being human? You can be if you are willing to put yourself, those you love, and all you treasure, into God’s hands. Put your whole weight on God this day. Your lamp will be filled to overflowing. And you will be prepared for whatever tomorrow may bring. This is the place where we have open hearts, open doors and open minds. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

---

1. Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Wedding, p. 1095.

2. Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey Days* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), p. 39.

3. *Slaying The Giants In Your Life* (Nashville, TN:W Publishing Group, 2001), p. 2.