

What's in Your Flask?  
Matthew 25:1-13  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached November 9, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

Perhaps some of you remember from your college days the dreaded “all-nighter,” those times of the semester or term when going to bed just wasn’t an option if you wanted to turn that paper in on time, or get ready for that comprehensive final exam. And so, with the help of a lot of coffee, or what we used to call No-doze – caffeine pills – you would trudge on through the night skimming endless pages of dreadful textbooks or pounding away on your typewriter in an increasingly gibberish sort of way, until you saw the sun rise and knew your doom was imminent, because even though you had stayed up all night, you hadn’t really advanced nearly as far as you thought you would, and the deadline was just an hour away. And then maybe you looked back and said to yourself, “What a fool I have been! Why on earth didn’t I just start on this paper back in September when it was assigned?” And then you remembered all the truly important things you did earlier in the semester, like the late-night pizza runs, and staring moony-eyed at that adorable freshman at the head of the class, or playing in the intramural dorm football championship. And then the all-nighter seemed worth it, and you went on to get a C when you should have had an A, but hey, you really didn’t care. A fool and his high marks are soon parted.

There are several parables and stories in the Gospels of people who were called upon to pull an all-nighter. The disciples who accompany Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest can't quite make it through the night without falling asleep, and so are chastised by Jesus. In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples, "Therefore keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come [and] he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly," never a good idea to be caught napping when one should be working." And of course we have tonight's parable about 10 bridesmaids, or virgins as is used in some other translations, 10 virgins and their lamps who fall asleep while awaiting the return of the groom, a parable Jesus concludes by saying, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," and it is the uncertainty of the time of his return in glory to which he is referring. All throughout these chapters in Matthew which immediately precede the drama of Jesus arrest, death, and resurrection, are apocalyptic words, teachings about what the disciples must do, and be prepared to do, after Jesus is gone, and through the uncertain and dangerous times until he comes again. Throughout, the wisdom offered to the disciples is to be alert, to watch for the signs, to pay attention to all that they have been taught, so that they may face that unknown future with their integrity, and their righteousness intact. To do that requires more than coffee, or caffeine tablets.

Tonight's parable is a little unusual, however, in offering a variation on a theme. If we read carefully, we learn that the difference between the wise virgins

and the foolish virgin is not, in fact, their ability to successfully pull off an all-nighter, for they all fall sleep, but that the difference is between those who were prepared for the long haul, and those who were not. There was no shame in sleeping, but there was foolishness in thinking that the waiting would be short, easy, and without cost. The foolish bridesmaids took lamps but no fuel, a truly foolish thing to do. I guess we are supposed to believe that when they set out it was daytime, and that the five foolish virgins didn't think they would need to be out after dark. If that is the case, we'll never know why they brought their lamps in the first place. Admittedly, this parable is a little sketchy with its details, and doesn't actually make a lot of sense even according to what we know about wedding customs of the time, but then again, it was never meant to be a guide to successful wedding planning. It was meant to be a guide to successful perseverance in the faith. Its message is that it simply will not do to lead an unprepared life. Our faith is not something we can take casually, as if it were the difference between making an A or a C because we goofed off the first nine of the ten weeks of our semester. You may be able to get a good job with some C's on your transcript, but when the Lord comes, beware that you do not hear "Truly, I tell you, I do not know you" and be left outside in the darkness for having put off until tomorrow what you could have done today.

All of this is to say that Jesus' concluding remarks are better understood as "Remain prepared," rather than "Keep awake." Watchfulness is important, but

perhaps more so is the attitude of righteousness that aids us in our preparedness to meet our maker. Indeed, it is not because we are straight A students that God loves us, but that because God loves us that we ought to aspire to be straight A students. We do not earn this favor, but we do choose how we will respond to it, and from Matthew's perspective, this is best done by preparing oneself according to the teachings of Christ, and being the kind of wise disciples who know enough to prepare themselves for the long haul of faith. And just how does a faithful disciple do that? Well, there are a lot ways to do it, but what they all have in common is that we don't wait until the last minute, we don't leave it for other people to do for us, and we don't do it alone. You don't wake up one day suddenly righteous, you can't pay or coerce someone to do it for you, and if you can do it without any help from others, we want to hear from you now.

You see, for Matthew, preparedness is righteousness, the kind of concrete thinking and acting found in the Sermon on the Mount, the storing up of behaviors and practices that not only please God and bless other people, but that keep us from falling into the kind of hypocrisy for which Jesus so frequently criticized the religious leaders of his time. That righteousness is the oil in the flasks of the wise which keeps lit their lamps through the darkest hours, the times when the world seems on the brink of collapse, when lives are lost senselessly, and futures squandered needlessly. It is the oil that keeps burning the lamp of freedom and dignity in the face of naked aggression and unbridled ambition. It is the oil that

keeps the lamp aflame for hope and life, when despair and ignorance would snuff them out. It is the oil that lights the way to healing and wholeness when moral decay and political opportunism wound the minds, bodies, and spirits of real people.

The flask of the fool, on the other hand, represents the kind of short-term thinking and behaving that leads people and nations into doing the kinds of tragic things we must now, later, gather to remember. The flask of the fool contains none of the goodwill, goodness, and Good News that should light our futures. Alas, it is not simply an empty flask, but one filled with the kindling of violence and war, filled with hubris, deceit, and self-interest. Rather than bringing light, it brings destruction and sorrow, tearing apart the fabric of communities and lives. Perhaps it would not be so bad if, like the foolish virgins in the parable, the fool was ever only the victim of his or her own foolishness, but we know that is not how it works. We know that others are dragged down with them into the fruits of their foolishness, and suffer and die the same terrible death.

As we gather tonight in remembrance of those who served their countries in the darkest hours of their nations, I want to suggest to you tonight why it is important that we gather to remember. We gather not to remember great battles and heroic deeds; that is the realm of the storyteller. We gather not to remember the tactics and strategies that brought victory or defeat; that is the realm of the historian. We do not even gather to remember that God was on our side; that is the

realm of the fool or the zealot. No, it is important that we gather to remember because it fills our flasks with that precious kind of oil, the kind that heals broken hearts, the kind that helps us survive the loss of loved ones taken from us, the kind that honors commitment and sacrifice, that kind that slowly puts back together what war has torn apart; that is the realm of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

I said earlier that we prepare ourselves for Christ's coming not by waiting until the last minute, or leaving it for other people to do for us, and that we don't do it alone. It is in gathering annually to remember that we do not lose the capacity to remember; we cultivate that virtue for future generations that they might have it when they need it, for every generation will, lamentably, need to fight its wars. We ourselves gather to remember so that this responsibility is not left to someone else who may or may not take it as seriously as it deserves. We gather to remember as a community of faith, and not merely as individuals, for the burden is too great for any one of us to bear alone. We gather to remember because it is the response of people who have experienced the healing grace of God to want to share it with others and with our nations.

But there is another side of this remembrance that aids us in our preparedness for Christ's coming, and that is the side that does everything in its power to prevent the need for yet more such commemorations. Although it may be sort of a downer to remember the casualties of war, it is a necessary reminder if we are to have any chance at all of avoid even one more of the kinds of conflicts

which make widows and orphans, which destroy economies and landscapes, which rend the very heart of God. We have all been frequently reminded of George Santayana's famous statement that "Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it," but how good we are at forgetting! Generation after generation of human beings live the very definition of insanity made popular by Albert Einstein, which he described as "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." We are an insane people trying to fight wars to bring peace instead of waging peace to end war. But we must be an insane people trying to overcome our insanity one flask of righteous oil at a time, by delving deep into the heartbreak of not only our soldiers and their families, but civilians too, and even God's good earth. If, by our remembering, we can be like the wise virgins who were welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven, will not that please God, bless others, and keep us safe from the charge of hypocrisy?

I want to take advantage of the image of the virgins, their lamps, and their flasks of oil to illuminate this final idea, if you will pardon the pun. If we are, as Jesus tells us, the light of the world, a lamp that ought not be hidden under a basket, what fuels our lamp? Do we have oil in them at all, and if so, how much, and of what quality? Yes, it is the oil we bring to our watchfulness that makes us prepared. The wise will keep flasks full of the oil of remembrance, of healing, of honor. But they will also keep them full of the oil of justice and temperance, and good judgment, and hope and peace-bringing. The foolish think that the

consequences of their actions will be quick, painless, and victorious, or don't care if they are not, and so they think there will be no need to grieve, mourn, lament, or remember, and so leave their flasks empty or forgotten. Are we wise or foolish? What's in your flask this Remembrance Day? Amen.