

When the moment arrives

Matthew 25:1-13

May 4, 2008

When the moment arrives ...

I have been fascinated for a long time by the idea of "the moment," by the idea of a single moment in time, this moment in time. To think of "the moment," you have to narrow your focus to one point in time, like freezing and enlarging a single frame of a movie. You have to forget or ignore all that has happened in your past, as much or as little as that may be, and you have to put out of your mind all that is still to come, as much or as little as that may be, and you have to think only about now, about this moment.

What does it mean to be alive ... in this moment? Who am I ... in this moment? What am I aware of ... in this moment? What am I feeling, what am I doing ... in this moment?

So much of the time, we are not aware of "the moment." Moments come and go, lots of them, but we are not aware of them. We are not tuned in to them. Instead we move through time in large chunks: a morning, an afternoon, days and weeks, at a time. We think in terms of progression and duration and accomplishment, what has been done and what there is still to do. As the moments fly by we are thinking about what comes next, about what we have to do next, or we are playing over and over again in our minds what happened yesterday or what happened last week or even what happened fifteen years ago. Our attention is fixed on our hopes and fears, or on our reminiscences and regrets ... or both.

But what does it mean to be alive in this moment? Here in this sanctuary, on this particular Sunday, during this one hour of worship, at this one moment? Where are you? Who are you? What are you? What does your life mean?

How would answer those questions knowing only this one moment, ignoring all that lies behind and all lies ahead? Look around you! Look inside you! Pay attention to now! What do you see? What do you know? What does it mean ... just to be? What does it mean just to be ... with God?

Jesus said: *At that time, the Kingdom of heaven will be like this ...* At that time. At that moment.

What time? What moment? At the time of the coming of the Son of Man! At the time of the fruition of the kingdom of God! At the time when God will come to set things right and make all things new! At the time when people will weep for joy because the day they have waited for, the world they have prayed for, is here at last!

It is the same time, the same context, referenced by the parable of the three servants, the focus of the sermon two weeks ago. The parable of the ten young women is placed just before the parable of the three servants in Matthew 25, both a part of a longer collection of Jesus' parables and teachings in Matthew 24-25 about the coming of the Kingdom, about the end of this age.

In all of it, he cautions his followers that they cannot know when that day will come, but that they must be ready for it when it does come. They must not be caught napping. They must not grow inattentive or uncaring because that day seems long in coming. They must be ready.

When the moment arrives, will you be ready? When Jesus comes, will you be ready?

That's the important question, because there is no question Jesus is ready. Jesus is ready to receive you! Jesus is ready to welcome you! Jesus is ready to invite you in to the wedding feast! There is no hesitation, no pause for consideration, no weighing the merits of whether to welcome you in or not. Jesus is ready to receive you, no matter who you are. The question is, will you be ready to receive him?

In Jesus' parable, five young women were not ready. Five young women were left outside because they were not prepared when the moment arrived. All ten young women were eager to meet the bridegroom when he came, but when, after some delay, the moment finally arrived, five of them were ready and five were not.

Because, Jesus says, five of them were wise and five of them were foolish. At first hearing, this doesn't seem fair to me. I mean, the foolish ones are doomed from the start, aren't they? After all, they are the foolish ones! Of course, they'll not remember to bring along some extra oil! It's just who they are ... foolish young women. They're doomed from the start. Aren't they?

I don't think so. The more I hear the parable, the more hopeful it seems. The foolishness of the five young women is not an identity trait. It is an assessment of what they did, or, rather, what they failed to do. At that time, in that moment, all ten young women have a choice. All ten have the opportunity to be ready for the bridegroom when he comes. All ten are capable of doing the wise thing. It is the decision to bring extra oil that is wise.

At this time, in this moment, you have a choice. You have an opportunity. You can be wise! You have no predetermined destiny. You not "the foolish one," not "the one who always messes up." In this one moment, you are free. Every possibility is open to you! So when the moment arrives, will you be ready? When Jesus comes, will you be ready? When Jesus comes, will you be ready to receive him?

I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.

Jesus does come to us, not only at the end of the age, but now, as these words of Jesus, also from Matthew 25, suggest. Jesus does come to us now, in these moments, in many unexpected ways, in many unexpected disguises.

Actually, Jesus is not disguised. It is he who comes to us in the form of those who are hungry and thirsty and lonely and scared. We love him, Jesus tells us, by loving our brothers and sisters. When we love them and serve them, we love him and serve him.

So when the moment arrives, will you be ready? When Jesus comes, will you be ready to receive him? Will you be ready to recognize him, welcome him, serve him?

A friend comes to you, tentatively, hinting at a dark secret, wanting to confide but too ashamed to confide the heavy burden, the deep guilt, the real sin, that has derailed her life and imprisoned her soul for so long ...

Will you be ready ... to hear her? To draw her out? To bear the burden with her? To offer her comfort? To offer your embrace? To offer her forgiveness in Jesus' name?

Or will you pretend not to notice her expression, not to pick up on her pain, and steer the conversation in another, safer, direction?

When the moment arrives, will you be ready?

It started as a casual conversation, but somehow now you're talking about faith, talking about faith with this stranger you just met in the lunchroom! He's asking if you go to church. He's asking about what you believe or don't believe. He's asking as if he really wants to know, as if he really wants something, as if he really wants you to give him something ...

Will you be ready ... to listen? To give him what he wants from you? To give him what he needs from you? To tell him what you believe, but more importantly why you believe? Will you tell him who Jesus is and what Jesus really means to you?

Or will you give him some generalized, generic, innocuous response, something anybody could say, something anybody might believe, hoping he will change the subject?

When the moment arrives, will you be ready?

When you hear of food riots in Haiti, or displaced families in Iraq, or children living and dying with AIDS in Africa, or people imprisoned for years without trial at Guantanamo; when you see a man sleeping under a bridge, or a woman picking through a can of garbage, or a child who cannot read, will you be ready?

Will you be ready to take action, to do whatever you can do, to do something?

Or will you bemoan the state of the world and the plight of your neighbors and hope that somebody will do something about it?

When the moment arrives, will you be ready?

It's all about being ready. And you have to get ready before the moment arrives! You have to fill up your oil container and bring it with you! Then when the moment arrives, when the bridegroom finally comes, you are ready.

Oil is fuel, fuel for the flame, fuel for the fire. What is the fuel for spiritual fire? For spiritual passion? For spiritual energy? You'll be reminded next Sunday! It is the Spirit! The Holy Spirit, God's spirit, the spirit of Jesus, is the source of life and energy and passion and fire and hope and love and joy!

So if you want to be ready, if you want to be wise, you need to fill up! You need to be filled with the Spirit. You need to be filled with the spirit of Jesus. Then you'll be ready when the moment arrives.

You do realize that's what we're doing here? When we sing God's praises together, when we listen to God's word together, when we share joys and concerns and pray for each other, when we share the bread and wine of the communion table, we are filling up! We are getting ready!

This isn't where it happens. This is where we get ready for when it happens, so that when the moment arrives ...