

Sermon: 2020/11/08 (23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) - *Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13_BTR*

[Ask for children to come forward. Chessboard with extra "characters." I.e. action figures, etc.]

Kids Talk: Playing by the Rules - The Only Way to Win

Who knows how to play chess?
Anyone?

[Bring out into view a chessboard ready to go. Invite a volunteer forward.]

Okay, do you know the rules?
They're pretty straightforward, really.
Not many of them either:
(1) White goes first.
(2) The players take turns, moving one piece at a time. And
(3) Each type of chess piece has its own method of movement -
The pawn moves forward in straight lines.
The "king" can move in any direction, but only one square at a time;
Etc., etc.
That's it! (Pretty much.)
Shall we play?
You go first.

[After one or two turns, place one of the action figures on the board.]

Ok, now I'm going to "Batman" you.

[Child reacts.]

No?
That's not right?
I can't win that way?
Well, today Joshua explains to the Israelites that the only way they would win at this "game" called "life" is to obey God and play by His rules of "The Covenant." Like the Ten Commandments.

Cheating would only lead to bad things.
And that's true for us too now.

Let's pray:
Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to return to their places.]

The Ten Bridesmaids

I remember from my childhood a popular "bumper-sticker" slogan.
You used to see it on t-shirts too.
It said: "*Quick*, look busy! Jesus is coming."
Do you remember it?
It still makes me smile.
And yet I'm not *entirely* certain that I know what it means.
That is to say, I'm not "entirely certain" what the person who came up with it meant us to think.
After all, to my mind there are at least *two* interpretations:

Firstly - the one that makes me smile - is rather mischievous.
Blasphemous, even.
It *could* be suggesting that if we see Jesus suddenly descending from the "heavens" for Judgement Day we should *pretend* that we haven't noticed.
Like Jesus is an annoying little brother who won't leave his adolescent siblings in peace, and keeps pestering them to join in with "this" or "that" game.
In other words, is the slogan urging us to merely *appear* like we're being "busy" as if that will save us from needing to stand before His throne when the "Book of Life" is opened?

And, let's face it, we've probably *all* used that sort of avoidance tactic with somebody at least once, right?
I used it just the other day - on "Halloween," in fact.
We hadn't bought any candy, you see, and Poppy was standing in the living-room near the front-door, and as I walked in with, *legitimately*, something to say to her, I saw something through the window that she couldn't, which was a "bunch" of trick-or-treaters coming down the path, and I just quickly "turned on my heel" and walked away as if I had suddenly thought of something important to do somewhere else in the house, (leaving her to break the bad news to some cute children in costumes).
And I *know* others of you here can sympathize!

But Jesus won't be deterred from the Grand Plan of Salvation if we just ignore Him.

Quite the reverse, in fact.

Indeed, in the *Letter to the Ephesians*, Saint Paul says that the Lord decided on this plan 'before [even] the foundation of the world'; and it's going to keep on moving forward 'according to His good pleasure' until 'the times reach their fulfilment': [1:4-10, (N.I.V.)].

(That's a quote.)

Like a bulldozer.

Or an ice-breaker ship in the Arctic.

Or a glacier moving downhill.

The obvious question, then, is:

"When do the 'the times reach their fulfilment'?"

But Paul tells the Ephesians only that it is a 'mystery'.

And, astonishingly, perhaps - from our point-of-view, this "mystery" was withheld from Jesus too - the Son of God, Second Person of the Trinity, during His incarnation on earth:

"But about that day and hour no one knows, ...but only the Father." He taught.

Actually, let me remind you that those words were spoken to the (Twelve) Disciples just moments before the sentences we heard from today's (New Testament) reading.

Today's reading, of course, was the parable about the Ten Bridesmaids, also called "The Wise and Foolish Virgins."

Jesus volunteers this parable during a discussion with His friends as they sat on the so-called, "Mount of Olives."

It was, basically, "Part Two" of His response to the shock that they had expressed when He told them a little while earlier that Herod's magnificent, *massive* Temple would be, one day, *utterly* destroyed.

And from where they were talking they had a great view of it across the valley: From the Mount of Olives they could see it towering well above every other structure in the city of Jerusalem.

Reaching toward the sky.

Beautiful white marble and gold-leaf gleaming and shining in the hot, bright sunshine.

The largest building, very probably, that they had seen in their lifetimes. And *would* see.

One of the very largest in the world.

And yet Jesus just *sweeps* it away with as few disparaging words, unimpressed. He dismisses it.

They - the disciples - could hardly conceive that such an *incredible* structure - constructed at great expense - could be so...temporary. So, *fragile*.

And you and I can hardly conceive that, one day, this universe and our achievements - our lives - might just stop; that, as the Bible makes clear, *all* of creation will be caused to collapse and disintegrate exactly as Jesus predicted was going to happen to the Temple. And because we struggle to believe that such a thing is true; because we struggle to imagine Jesus *really* coming back to bring about such an outcome, we, sometimes, falter in our faithfulness, don't we? Or is it just me?

- I frequently falter in my faithfulness.
I frequently find my commitment to Christ becoming complacent; *lazy*.
I'll repent tomorrow.
Or next week, maybe.
I'll get serious about following Jesus and imitating Him when I'm done with getting rich;
or...becoming successful,
or...when I've graduated highschool,
or...after I've got that promotion,
or won that next race.
Or finished building that extension to the house.
But now here we come up against the second interpretation of the famous bumper-sticker - Jesus' point is that, because *The End* is a 'mystery' *and yet a certainty* we can't afford to put sanctification - becoming "holy" - on "the back burner" for another day, because He might return at *any* moment.
At a "moment" *before* we intended to get around to taking discipleship seriously.
At a moment before we confessed and changed our self-serving ways.
And this wouldn't just be mildly regrettable, this would, according to this morning's lesson, be a *disaster*:
Look again at how, in the parable, once the door was shut to latecomers to the wedding-feast, it doesn't open again - It. Stays. Shut.
And notice that the homeowner won't be persuaded to relent.
Nor is there a sidedoor;
a secret passageway that lets the five bridesmaids who hadn't bothered to keep their lamps burning to sneak into the party by another way.
There's not an unlocked window or basement access symbolising salvation by another way.
No, Jesus assumes that the disciples understand that the Kingdom-which-is-Coming - the "New Jerusalem" - *paradise* - is represented in the analogy by the standard Judean 1st century home:
Flat-roofed, cubic, and sat within a walled compound with a *single*, heavy entrance. - one that was locked at sunset.
And that makes sense.
Let's just inhabit that ancient world for a minute.

Let's visit that time and place -
no street-lighting *whatsoever*;
no electricity.

A world lit only by fire.

Imagine, then, how dark the night's would have been.

And imagine the dangers that existed after the sun went down:
the wolves and the bears.

The bandits and robbers.

Roman soldiers.

Terrorists - the "Zealots."

This was a violent place, a place rife with crime and misfortune.

And the point, of course, was to carefully restrict admittance to only the right kind
of people.

To the people who were invited to attend - and they would prove themselves
invited by having in their possession *burning* lamps by which they could be
recognized in such deep, hazardous darkness - the burning lamps, then, which are
a symbol of being *active* participants in the wedding-feast;
that is to say, being active *Christians*.

That's people busy, first and foremost, about the *Lord's* work.

"Busy" actively sharing their faith.

"Busy" actively supporting the Church and its worship. And so on.

So quick, let's get to it.

Heaven awaits.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, amen.