My sermon title for today is “Keep Awake: Unpacking the Parable Paradox.”

The passage that I just read from the gospel of Matthew comes in the context of a larger conversation between Jesus and his disciples that began earlier in chapter 24. They have asked, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Mt 24:3) Jesus offers a few examples that reinforce the need for watchfulness, and he tells the disciples, to “keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Mt 24:42). The parables that follow the conversation are not simply about signs of the end of the age, but about how to live in this one. Within this larger framework, the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is the one of several in a series, which culminate later in Matthew 25 with the passage known as the Judgement of the Nations, where Jesus teaches in a different parable of the Kingdom, that even if you are unaware, *“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me*,” highlighting that we experience the presence of Christ in our encounters with others, even if we are unaware.

As I reflected on today’s parable, I admit, there are details that don’t sit right with me. How and what exactly does this parable teach us about the kingdom of heaven, about the reign of God? If I were to read this for the first time, what would be the obvious message and take-away of the story? To free my understanding from all the accumulated history of interpretation and see this passage with fresh eyes, my approach was to pretend that I had never heard this story, and build a sketch of each character. Here are some observations:

“wise women” earn that label because they thought ahead, were prepared and brought extra oil for their lamps. But at the same time, they are characterized as stingy and overprotective of their precious oil, which they guard from a scarcity mindset, because they fear there is not enough to last if they share. On face value the parable appears to applaud their wise preparation, but they hardly match the ethic Jesus espouses in the Sermon on the Mount “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (Mt 5:41)

"foolish women" are described in contrast to the wise women. Together they all kept vigil for the arrival of the bridegroom and fell asleep waiting. When the arrival was announced the contrast was clear. The "foolish women" did not come prepared with enough oil for their lamps. They abandon their expected role in the moment to do what is perceived as the "right" thing: they go to fetch more oil, action suggested by the wise women. When they return to the wedding banquet…late like the delayed bridegroom, these five women find the door shut, they are refused entrance, and split off from the group, they no longer belong.

There are only few details about the "bridegroom." He arrives late and then refuses hospitality to his late guests. He does not allow them in, and states "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Notice this twist from the build-up in earlier details: the basis for exclusion has nothing to do with whether the women were properly prepared, or wise. Simply put, the bridegroom does not recognize them. Ouch.

Engaging with any parable is an *experience* that invites us to adopt a new perspective. Jesus says "The kingdom of heaven will be likened to this…" But how? Looking at these characters afresh, a few things stand out. Each one of these characters fail to be there for each other. Some aren't prepared; others are stingy; and the groom excludes some of his guests. We have insiders and outsiders. How is this like the realm of God? Surely, it should be different. YES, exactly. The paradox of the parable invites us to have the courage to question assumptions about the story, and about how the world works.

One commentator I often consult delves deeply into the nuance of the original Greek text to search for meaning. I gleaned two significant things from his extremely detailed analysis of the Greek text. First, and most importantly, he points to the Greek verbal form/tense that often becomes translated as "the kingdom of heaven *will be like* this". In contrast with other kingdom of heaven sayings that use normal indicative voice "the kingdom of heaven is like", here in our passage the verb form is in the future passive

voice; he suggests there is a subtle nuance involved when using a future passive verbal tense to introduce the parable: what follows in the parable is ***not*** considered an endorsement of how to understand the arrival of God's reign. Second, he pointed out some interesting Greek wordplay. The word for young women (or virgins, as sometimes translated) is transliterated in Greek as *parthenon* and for bridegroom the transliterated Greek word is *nymphoi*. This wordplay may not signify anything, but together with the future passive verb to set up the "comparison", I wonder if the original listeners to Matthew's gospel would have already understood or recognized from the vocabulary used that the parable was introducing a paradox to understand what the Kingdom and Reign of God is **NOT** like.

As the parable pulls us in, we see the contrast between prepared and not prepared, and with the abundance of details given we start to think the message is about being prepared. The wisdom or folly of those who bring or fail to bring extra oil: these story elements are merely distractions in a description of what the kingdom of heaven is not, decoys that trick us to make false assumptions about meaning of the parable. Then we receive another clue that the parable might offer a twist or reversal to our assumptions. If we pay close attention to the rationale when the groom excludes half the bridal party, we learn that their exclusion was not a result of their failure to prepare but based on lack of recognition. Then the final jolt to seal the truth to the question asked much earlier by the disciples "what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mt 24:3) Jesus concludes the parable with these words: "keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour".

Keep awake, Jesus says, stay present. Pay attention to what is happening around you, in you, and to you. Keep awake is a call to be present and awake to those around us in the here and now. The imperative verb to "keep awake" then urges us to be alert and watchful so that we will also be able to recognize evidence of God's presence and activity in our world.

The paradox of the parable is intended to challenge and shock the audience and us into awareness that there are no tangible signs for the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. Rather, we are asked to keep awake now to the true presence of God who is already present in our midst.

What does it mean to keep awake? If we consider the notion of sleep, it might help us nuance the meaning of "awake", by way of contrast. Sleep is often understood as a metaphor for the unconscious, insensitive, unaware state. This state is a default setting, where we often lack awareness of issues, of injustice, of unfairness; when we are "asleep" we do not see, nor are we impacted by injustice around us, with the result we can be desensitized to needs of others. Other words to describe this state of being include numb, catatonic, sleep-walking, just going through the motions. By contrast, when we are awake, ideally we are present in the moment, in tune with what is going on around us, and aware of the presence and situation of others.

We might also ponder, "in what ways are we NOT awake?" to expand our awareness. If we are willing to explore the shadows of slumber, it can show us where we can and need to grow our awareness. Our reading from Amos offers some clues to consider. The prophet Amos brings the following message from God: *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*. The prophet's message is a solemn reminder that rigidly holding to ideas, ways of doing things, and complacency with the status quo are devoid of the grace of God.

God's preference is clear: "*let justice roll down like water and righteousness like and ever-flowing stream*." Justice rolls down when we listen to each other's stories, bear each other's burdens, and sit vigil with each other at times of pain, loss or bereavement. When we celebrate achievements together or console after disappointment, we share the presence and love of God with

one another. We can offer hope when hope is scarce, comfort when it is needed, and courage when we are afraid; and each time we advocate for the poor, reach out to the friendless, promote peace, we are awake and bearing witness to the presence of God in our midst.

And when we work for the healing of the world, offer our own gifts to help transform injustice in our society, and reach out peacefully with compassion and understanding to a world that is physically and spiritually hungry, we participate in bringing about the Kingdom and Reign of God.

There will be times when we are wise, times when we are foolish, and times when we close the door and exclude others. We have been asked to stay awake but there will be moments when our awareness is offline. But this I know: the promise of God's presence and love remains steadfast and sure. His justice rolls down like waters, and His righteousness is like an ever-flowing stream.

Keep awake friends, because *Emmanuel*, "God with us" is already present in our midst. AMEN.

Hymn of Response

750 *How deep the silence of the soul*