

# THE PEOPLE OF GOD AT WORSHIP

FIFTH SUNDAY OF THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 9, 2008

## INVOCATION

Fill our hearts this day LORD as we seek  
the courage to trust your Love and  
Compassion for every day.

Fill our hearts this day LORD with a spirit  
of joy that comes from gathering to sing  
praises to You for the gifts of life  
You so freely give.

Fill our hearts this day LORD as  
we seek wisdom in all we do.

## MORNING PRAYER

LORD of All Time and LORD of Every  
Place ~ You are always in and among us  
and still we move through our days  
unaware of your Grace, your Compassion,  
your Strength and your Peace which are  
offered so freely. We pray for open hearts  
to hear and see and know all that You are  
and all we can become as we strive to  
witness your Love in all our days.

In the Name of the Living Christ  
we pray. AMEN

## SCRIPTURE ~ Matthew 25:1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like  
this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and  
went to meet the bridegroom. {2} Five of  
them were foolish, and five were wise. {3}  
When the foolish took their lamps, they  
took no oil with them; {4} but the wise took  
flasks of oil with their lamps. {5} As the  
bridegroom was delayed, all of them  
became drowsy and slept. {6} But at  
midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is  
the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' {7}  
Then all those bridesmaids got up and  
trimmed their lamps. {8} The foolish said to  
the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our  
lamps are going out.' {9} But the wise  
replied, 'No! there will not be enough for

you and for us; you had better go to the  
dealers and buy some for yourselves.' {10}

And while they went to buy it, the  
bridegroom came, and those who were  
ready went with him into the wedding  
banquet; and the door was shut. {11} Later  
the other bridesmaids came also, saying,  
'Lord, lord, open to us.' {12} But he replied,  
'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' {13}  
Keep awake therefore, for you know  
neither the day nor the hour.

~ SERMON ~

## *What Are My Options?*

*The choices we make determine our days.*

Whenever I have a Bible study,  
my favorite method is a very straight-  
forward process. We simply read the  
scripture passage three times and in  
between each reading, I offer a question  
for the people to consider.

This particular brand of Bible  
study came out of Africa and I like it  
because it takes me out of the role of the  
Bible teacher and allows the scripture  
to speak to each person individually.

There are no wrong answers, the  
questions are very open-ended and  
sometimes people hear different things  
when the passage is read several times.

These are the questions. After  
the first reading we ask:

*What do you hear in the passage?*

With this question we are  
exploring a basic understanding,  
clarifying any tricky words and  
customs that might be in the text. After  
the second reading we ask:

*How does this passage touch your life?*

And after the third reading, we ask:

*How does this passage  
invite you to change?*

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*What Are My Options?*

*A Sermon preached on Sunday 9 November 2008 ~ First Baptist, Painted Post, NY*

A few years ago, Amy Grant<sup>1</sup> was in the Bible study and the passage for the day was the same one I read this morning ~ of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. After we read the verses for the second time,

I asked everyone the second question:

*How does this passage touch your life?*

And Amy immediately responded:

*Well ~ if the man had been on time, everyone would have been able to attend the wedding!*

And then I believe Amy followed up with a question that was really more of a commentary on the situation:

*And what was this bridegroom doing out till midnight on his wedding day anyway?*

You see ~ this is the kind of Bible study they don't teach you in seminary.

I believe I will tell that story every three years when this passage comes up in the lectionary. Thank you Amy Grant.

In the end, no matter from which side you explore the story, this little parable of the Kingdom of God encourages a person to ask him or herself:

*Am I ready for whatever is coming down the road in my life? Of all the possible choices I might make, have I made a good ones for this day?*

The five young maidens with the empty lamps had not asked those questions.

The five young maidens with oil in their lamps had taken a little time for reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Grant is a member of First Baptist, Painted Post, NY

*As a little "Bible study sidebar,"* I want to be very clear about other meanings some folks might offer from this story.

There are those who will look at this apocalyptic tale of five young maidens left outside the gate and use this parable as a warning and a threat to get people to make a certain kind of decision about their understanding of God. You might hear ideas similar to these...

*Did you hear this story?*

*Do you want to be on the outside of the Gate of Heaven wishing you could get in?*

*Do you want to be outside when all your friends and loved ones are inside?*

*Do you want to be outside for all eternity when St Peter or Jesus or God says to you: 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you...'*

***If you take only one thing from this sermon, please understand:***

***Being left out of heaven***

***is not what this story is about.***

We have four Gospels chock full of a Jesus who says over and over:

*God loves you, God loves you exactly the way you are and God will never, never, never stop loving you because good Mommies and Daddies never stop loving their children and **you are a holy sacred child of God!***

We can't tell stories about that Jesus and God's Love and then in the end say:

*Sorry you can't come in, you did not do something in time, you are too late.*

What kind of a loving parent does that? Besides, my Mother was always late everywhere she went and I seem to have adopted a few of her traits.

But really... everyone is late once in a while. We are all in this together. Life is hard enough. Let's not use the Bible to threaten people.

*I believe this story has more to do* with those times in our lives when we have not made good decisions.

We believe we have made all of the necessary arrangements and arrive to find the boat left yesterday.

We plan a beautiful outdoor wedding and realize we have no plan B as the big thunderclouds roll in.

We have our ticket in hand but no extra clothes and our luggage is in Cincinnati.

We plan every detail of our very successful life but provide no time to nurture our soul.

And then we wake up one day and realize our soul is lost or gone or so empty and shriveled, it is of little or no value.

In those instances, it would have been better to ask a little earlier:

*Am I ready for whatever is coming down the road in my life?*

*Of all the possible choices I might make, have I made a good ones for this day?*

**The passage from Joshua 24 that** I noted in your bulletin is one of those instances where one person is trying to get a large group of people to think about those questions.

Moses has died and Joshua had taken over as leader of the Hebrew children.

At this point in the story, these folks have made it through the wilderness and have come into the Promised Land of Canaan but the Promised Land was not full of all the happy promises the Hebrew children

had hoped for and this was primarily their own doing.

As soon as they arrived, everyone started to adopt many of the ways of the Canaanites ~ their foods and their customs... and their gods.

Joshua was getting old and knew he was going to be dying soon. He could see what was happening.

The people were having some rough times; not always giving their full allegiance to the YAHWEH ~ the One God who delivered them through the Wilderness.

With these other gods around, the people swayed, they drifted, they moved away from their devotion to YAHWEH.

And so the scripture says:  
*Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people,*  
*"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors ~ Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor--lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.*

*I gave Abraham a son Isaac...<sup>2</sup>*  
and the story continues with a wonderful summary of the Hebrew people from Abraham all the way up to that moment when Joshua was speaking. And then Joshua wraps up the history this way:

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua 24:1-3a

Now therefore revere the LORD,  
and serve him in sincerity and in  
faithfulness; put away the gods that your  
ancestors served beyond the River and in  
Egypt, and serve the LORD.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the  
LORD, choose this day whom you will  
serve, the gods of your ancestors or the gods  
in this land where you are living; but as for  
me and my household,  
we will serve the LORD.<sup>3</sup>

Joshua knew what was coming  
and he wanted the people to know that  
their relationship with God was going  
to be based on a decision to make a  
commitment.

Joshua knew the people were  
going to worship and serve some kind  
of God ~ everyone serves some kind of  
God. We all choose the gods we serve.  
Joshua's message was plain and simple:

*You can do what you want but as for me  
and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

***There was even a time when Jesus***  
had to make the same kind of decision.  
Before he started his teaching and  
preaching and healing, in his forty day  
Wilderness experience, scripture says

*Jesus was tempted by Satan*  
or as Clarence Jordan writes:

*...Jesus was tempted by the Confuser.*  
And you can almost hear the  
Confuser...

*Jesus ~ you have a marvelous gift,  
you have a way to truly touch  
people and change their lives.  
You need to get your message  
out to everyone.*

*If you let me work with you,  
we can get everything you want  
~ peace, prosperity,*

*you are the man to deliver it all.  
All you have to do is  
re-arrange your priorities just a little...  
Let's get you a new set of clothes,  
some fancy wheels, introduce you  
to some powerful people,  
just let me make all the decisions  
and we will be on our way.  
Trust me Jesus, you can do this.*

But... Jesus said no to it all:  
No to the God of Unlimited Power  
No to the God of Wealth  
No to the God of Political Greatness.  
Jesus' reply was simple  
*You shall worship the Lord your God,  
and him only shall you serve.*

There are reasons why we need  
to ask those questions over and over  
in our lives.

***There are reasons why these***  
ancient stories in the Bible are just as  
important today as they were two  
thousand and three thousand years  
ago.

Why? Because the Children of  
God of today are just like the Hebrew  
children three thousand years ago.

We regularly forget the God who  
delivered us and we get caught up in  
the hurry of the day, we start to look  
around at all the stuff the world offers  
and we say

*Hey that looks like fun!*

In no time at all, our priorities get  
all messed up and we are lost.

If you go back and read the entire  
text in Joshua 24, you can easily get the  
feeling that there is a kind of call and  
response going on between Joshua and  
the people gathered there in Shechem.

Today Bible scholars feel that is  
exactly what this text is all about.

This passage was actually part of

<sup>3</sup> Joshua 24:14-15

an annual ceremony, where Jews used this text as a central part of their worship and re-enacted the conversation between Joshua and the people recommitting themselves to God.

The stories we tell here in church, the stories we tell over and over, season after season, year after year are so important because our worship together in community helps us remember and helps us to slow down and re-orient our lives that can so easily get off track.

*Along with Holy Scripture and stories and this church community, I depend on poets to help me remember and come back to God.*

Ranier Marie Rilke is a German poet who captures the spirit of joy that comes when we open and align ourselves to God.

These are his words:

*I believe in all that has  
never yet been spoken.  
I want to free what waits within me,  
so that what no one has dared to wish for*

*may for once ~ spring clear  
without my contriving.*

*If this is arrogant, God,  
please forgive me.  
But this is what  
I need to say:  
may what I do  
flow from me like a river,  
no forcing and  
no holding back,  
the way it is with children.*

*Then, in these swelling  
and ebbing currents,*

*these deepening tides  
going out, returning,  
I will sing you as no one ever has,*

*Streaming through widening channels  
and into the open sea.<sup>4</sup>*

We come together, we worship, we sing as no one ever has, we tell stories as old as time because, even though this is where our lives are the most real and the most honest, we still forget and sometimes we get lost.

*But along with forgetting and getting lost, we gather to celebrate life because it is here where we remember how precious every day is.*

That's the other message of the ten maidens: someday... someday the door to our lives is going to close and we will not be able to pass through.

Just this past Friday morning, I could not sleep and so I got up rather early to work and checked my email.

There on my computer screen were words I could not believe. One of the friends Annie and I have been in touch with over the years from Worcester, Dick Cranford, had died.

We called him Cranny. The Christmas card he and his wife Sandy send out last year was just like every other year ~ they were always so much fun to read because they were both such unabashed fans of their children ~ they celebrated all their transitions ~ graduations, weddings, family get-togethers, the birth of one grandchild and the anticipation of another.

While visiting their son in Seattle

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<sup>4</sup> From Ranier Marie Rilke, Book of Hours/Love Poems to God

this past August, Cranny did not feel well and when he came home, he went to the doctor and was eventually diagnosed with an esophageal tumor that spread the cancer very quickly. Cranny died November 6<sup>th</sup>.

When Annie and I were raising our girls, the Cranfords celebrated all of our transitions right along with us.

Cranny was a jeweler and made the setting for the diamond ring Annie wears today.

They retired to their vacation home just outside of Portland, Maine and we stayed in touch.

*In their retirement years,*

Cranny's wife Sandy had cancer twice and beat it both times.

His daughter Kathy said her father was lucid right up to the end and that he said he was going to be alive long enough to see Obama elected President. No surprise: Cranny live to party just a little. Plus he was a big Red Sox fan ~ we had many connections...

Right after my Hell sermon, I shared with the Cranfords that there were some days when I wondered if staying in Painted Post was best for the church and me.

Cranny listened and remembered. Then a year or so later, he called to tell me his church had a pastoral opening ~ he said:

*Come on up to Maine Gary ~  
we don't believe in hell either.*

*Annie and I are both still in shock.* It is as if Cranny died in a traffic accident.

It all happened too fast. Why do we have to have some tragedy to open our eyes to the fact that every single

breath of every day is sacred and none of us know when the end is coming?

Why does someone have to die before we realize all over again that no hurt is worth carrying around?

Why does someone have to die before we realize all over again that no forgiveness is worth holding?

Why does someone have to die before we realize no hugs or *I love yous* need to be deferred until tomorrow.

My prayer is that we each have the Light of God in our lives with plenty of oil in our lanterns so that ~ as the wedding party of every day begins ~ we can be God's most enthusiastic celebrants of every moment.

May God Peace and Joy be yours.  
~ AMEN