*Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, `Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, `Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 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.' 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. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, `Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, `Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Matthew 25:1-13*

I feel like I am stuck in a groundhog day loop—have you ever seen that movie, with Bill Murray? He gets caught in a time-loop, where he wakes up every morning and finds that he is, again, for the 5th, 10th, 20th time experiencing February 2nd, groundhog day. For me, it is a groundhog day sort of sermon loop, where I approach the readings for my next sermon and am, somehow….again….faced with a fear-inducing apocalyptic warning from Matthew. As you may, or more likely may not, recall—the last time I preached, just a few weeks ago, we had the story of the Wedding Feast with the man who showed up without his wedding robe on and was sent into outer darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Today, we hear of 5 bridesmaids sent away at the door of the banquet, told by the groom that he doesn’t know them—thankfully no weeping and gnashing of teeth this week, but still, exclusion from eternal life with God in the analogy Matthew intends. After this month of preaching, this seminarian will approach future wedding reception invitations with a good deal of hesitancy! Just as we found a few weeks ago with the passage about the guy getting kicked out of the banquet because he didn’t wear a robe, this particular story is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. The 10 bridesmaids, meant to be analogous to us, the followers of Christ, anxiously awaiting the groom, Jesus, himself. And what will Christ do at his return, at the end of time? According to Matthew, a few weeks ago when I preached and again today, he will Judge—he will deem some wise, and some foolish—and he will save the wise, and cast out the foolish, because the foolish were unprepared.

I know that Matthew intends for us to take away from this passage that we need to put our heads down and live as we are instructed to chapters earlier in Jesus’ sermon on the Mount…Or Else. Or Else when Christ returns we will be judged as unworthy, and banished. But, that’s not what I take away from this passage, at least today. The truth of this passage for me, born out of my own experiences and those of many others, is that Jesus comes in the night. Christ returns to us in the night. The very middle of the night—when we are often scared, lonely, disoriented, wanting desperately to not be where we are, who we are, but not able to see any way out. For those of us who have suffered from bouts of insomnia, these middle-of-the-night feelings—fear, the desperate sense of isolation that comes from feeling like you are the only one awake in the world—are familiar. For many of us, they are feelings we have in the literal middle-of-the-night, but in figurative middles-of-the-night as well. Those times when we lose a sense of purpose or direction—when we feel terribly lonely and isolated—when we feel stuck, afraid, nervous, desperate for daylight, for a sense of what to do, for a companion to share the pain, for relief.

A few months before the birth of our first child, Simon, David and I read the book Operating Instructions by Anne Lamott out loud to each other each night before bed. In this book, Lamott, with her usual dose of humor, recounts her experience as a 35-year old single mother to her son, Sam, across the first year of Sam’s life.

“Sam was being hard to please,” she writes of one experience, “whiny and imperious and obviously feeling very sorry for himself, and at first I could kind of roll with it…But I couldn’t get him to stop and it wore me down. It was one of those times when I desperately needed to hand him over to someone, like, say, hypothetically, a mate, and there wasn’t anyone…Sam was so exasperating that I could feel fury coursing through my system, up into my arms, like charged blood. I made myself leave the room, just left him crying in his bassinet, in the living room…I went to the tiny bedroom in the back, and breathed, and prayed for major help. The next thing I knew I had decided to take him for a walk in the stroller in the dark.

 It was warm and the stars were just coming out. The sky seemed unusually deep. I said to God, I really need help tonight, I need you to pull a rabbit out of your hat. One minute later Bill and Emmy and Big Sam came walking along the road toward us. So we stopped to talk for a few minutes. Big Sam is such a brilliant and gentle little guy, so artistic and tender with the baby that it helped me to breathe again. I felt completely back in the saddle by the time we all said good-bye.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Christ comes to us in the night. Brilliant and gentle…artistic and tender….not, in my understanding, to catch us unaware so he can test how ready we are, but, like Anne Lamott describes, to help us breathe again. Christ comes to us in the night out of his own experience of what it is like to be so desperately human in the middle of the night. Matthew writes of Jesus’ tie in the Garden of Gethsemane, just a few chapters after our passage from today, “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.’”. God does not pull a rabbit out of a hat for Jesus, as Lamott requests, but he does for us—in Jesus, himself. Jesus comes to us in the night, just as he came in the night in the Gospel of Luke, hours after the discovery of his empty tomb, to his disciples locked away in the upper room, mourning his death—in fear of their lives, feeling so alone without their Rabbouni, their teacher, disoriented and totally uncertain about the way forward. Jesus came to them in the night. Jesus came to them in the night, not in judgment—not to yell at them for being afraid—not to catch them unprepared—but to comfort them, to restore their hope, to assure them of his love for them. He didn’t slam Peter for having betrayed him—he didn’t call them a bunch of cowards who were too dense to get what had happened. “Peace be with you” is what he said, and then he explained what had happened, and told them that they would be “Clothed with power from on high” and blessed them. He comes in the night to us, too—to give us peace, to clothe us with power from on high, to bless us.

As I was praying with this passage this week, I found myself reminded of one of the stories I recently read in a book some of you may have heard of called Tattoos on the Heart—this book was profiled on NPR at some point in the last year, and is about a ministry called Homeboy Industries. Homeboy Industries is in the heart of LA gang activity, ministering to high-risk former gang members. Roman Catholic priest Greg Boyle, it’s founder, recalls one episode with a young youth named Cesar, whom he had known since he was a small child:

“At three o’clock in the morning, the phone rings,” writes Boyle. “It’s Cesar. He says what every homie says when they call in the middle of the night, “Did I wake you?”

 I always think *Why no, I was just waiting and hoping that you’d call.*

 Cesar is sober, and it’s urgent that he talk to me.

 “I gotta ask you a question. You know how I’ve always seen you as my father—ever since I was a little kid? Well, I hafta ask you a question.”

 Now Cesar pauses, and the gravity of it all makes his voice waver and crumble, “Have I…been…your son?”

 “Oh, hell, yeah,” I say.

 “Whew,” Cesar exhales, “I thought so.”

 Now his voice becomes enmeshed in a cadence of gentle sobbing. “Then…I will be…your son. And you…will be my father. And nothing will separate us, right?”

 “That’s right.”

 In this early morning call, writes Boyle, Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having. The voice broke through the clouds of his terror and the crippling mess of his own history, and he felt himself beloved. Boyle ends the story by concluding that God, wonderfully pleased in him, is where God wanted Cesar to reside.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Christ comes in the middle of the night, not to ridicule, not to slam the door in our faces, but to claim us as daughters and sons worth having. And…despite this different perspective I hold compared to Matthew about what Christ does in the middle of the night, I have had my own versions of these powerful, middle-of-the-night conversations, and there is truth for me in Matthew’s awareness that we need to be ready for them. The conversation that Father Boyle had with Cesar was years in the making—years of building trust in the community—of caring, selflessly many times, for current and former gang members who, just in their association with him, put his life at risk—and Cesar, Cesar had to dig deeply to reach out—to trust this man who looked different from him, whose life experience was so radically different from his, in the midst of a gang culture built on suspicion, to reveal his deepest fear—his fear of being unlovable, of bringing so little to the world and relationships that he was not worth the risky, selfless love that an ideal father—the father everyone needs and deserves—has for his children. There was nothing easy about this middle-of-the-night conversation between Christ, Cesar, and Father Greg. Both Father Greg and Cesar had to do years of work to fill the oil in their lamps. But, when Christ came, in the middle of the night, each was ready.

Preparing ourselves to receive Christ in the night is hard work. So many of us find ourselves scurrying around at midnight, asking *others* for *our* oil—seeking validation from outside ourselves—from other people, from our achievements, from society at-large as we climb the various ladders placed in front of us. But Matthew reminds us today that we must take our own oil.

So…how are you building your oil supply? I want you to think for a few moments--Who are the people like Billy, Emmy and Big Sam, Father Boyle in your support network?......Do you allow yourself to fall apart?....If so, how do you engage God in those moments of desperation?....How do you pray?...Do you know what is your very deepest fear?

Christ comes in the night. Will you be ready to live in the peace he will offer you, to be clothed from power on high, to be blessed as his beloved child? Will you be ready to accept that you are a son or a daughter worth having?

Let us hear the words of John’s Gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” (John 1:5--New Living Translation)

AMEN

1. Anne Lamott, Operating Instructions: A Journal of my Son’s First Year (New York, Anchor Books: 1993), p. 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gregory Boyle, Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion, (New York: Free Press: 2010), Kindle Edition p. 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)