

SEMPER PARATUS/ALWAYS PREPARED

Many years ago three friends and I went to the movies with me on a cold December night. When we came out it had sleeted and the entire car was covered with ice and the streets too. There was no ice scraper to be found anywhere in the car. And, of course, as sometimes happens with older used cars the heat was not working. We tried to defrost and nothing happened. Finally, one guy had his school ID card and we used that to chip away a small 6 inch by 6 inch cleared part of the windshield for me to look through as I drove everybody home. It was cold, slippery and nasty. We were coming down a hill that had a very slight levelling off point where the railroad tracks came through and then continued to decline into our little town.

I was leaning as close to the six-inch space as I could, constantly wiping the fog away and using windshield wipers to keep it kind of clear. I hit the levelled off place and then continued down the hill. Right behind me a train passed. Not five feet behind us. No crossing barrier. There was a red light but invisible to me. It was the grace of God. I never saw it. Literally one less second would have killed four young men. We were just out for a night at the movies. We gave no thought to being prepared and we were not at all prepared. We had not given a thought to the weather and conditions that might happen. We were just in the moment and thinking of going to the movies. We were not paying attention although we probably thought we were. We all learned a lesson that night because the guys in the back seat saw the red light and thought I did and would stop. I never saw it. They were scared to death.

Be prepared. Are you? How prepared are you? And more important are you preparing your children to be prepared too? I mean for the most important things besides the ordinary things. We all make decisions. We choose what our children will get involved with, what activities they will participate, what sports or music they will play, what schools they will attend, how they will learn about their faith. This is even more true in this time of the coronavirus. In making such decisions we try to anticipate the future and try to foresee that when the things that can happen to young people begin to happen they are somewhat prepared. But we have to make the decisions about what is most important and prioritize things for them.

When I was growing up my parents said “No” to me much more than they said “Yes” to me. I didn’t like that but it helped me. It served to prepare me. They didn’t do this because they hated me. They did it because they loved me. They did not let me do everything I wanted to do. They did not give me everything I wanted. Not even for Christmas. They realized that I had to learn things like: delaying my gratification, how to be patient and wait for things, how to get along with my siblings and be fair and make sure that forgiveness was real and spoken. They taught me about integrity and how my word was to be my bond. No lying. They were on the watch for the things that can go astray in a family. It took constant vigilance. It was wearying and I am sure they didn’t like being the heavy all the time. But it worked. It was necessary. They were vigilant. They were watchful. They were thinking ahead and they were prepared, as prepared as they could be given the surprises of this life.

That is what today’s story is about. Some of the virgins are prepared and some are not. Some were paying attention and some were not. Paying attention or not paying attention. To what? To where God shows himself in life and what God asks of us in life while the rest of life is

going on all around us. Some of the bridesmaids were a little lazy or negligent or lackadaisical. Some were pretty used to having someone else pick up for them or get them out of a difficult situation of their own making. They weren't really applying themselves, they were taking the easy way. "I don't have enough oil for my lamp. Give me some of yours." But it doesn't always work like that.

What is the flask of oil a symbol for in this story? What is the energy source in your life and mine? Your spirit. Your soul. Your heart. BUT. In combination with and conjunction with the Holy Spirit of God. By ourselves or on our own we just do not have enough oil to keep our flames burning brightly. By ourselves and on our own we will not be mindful. By ourselves or on our own we do not have the capacity to be the persons we want to be, or do the good things we want to do. There is something missing. We need more. And Christ supplies it. If we believe it. If we accept the offer of his help. If we strive to cooperate with it we will have sufficient oil for our lamps, to keep our personal flame burning brightly.

But if we disregard the offer. If we do not teach our children the truth of our faith. If we try to make it through this life based on our own talents and abilities, intellect and skill, savvy and experience—we will find ourselves running out of oil. We will not have prepared well. Too self-reliant. Not trusting enough. Not sufficiently grateful.

The oil in the lamp is real wisdom and authentic virtue. Not pretend virtue or virtue for show only. You cannot give an infusion of virtue to another person. Either it is in there or it isn't. You cannot give it even if they ask you for it. It just isn't transferable. I cannot give you my faithfulness. You cannot give me your purity.

We are in November. The ninth month since the covid-19 outbreak went truly global. Enough time for a child to be conceived and born. The end of the calendar year is 7 weeks away. We have to get ready for Thanksgiving but a very different Thanksgiving this year. We have to get ready for Christmas. But Christmas too will be very different this year. But even if we do manage to get ready for those two great feasts are we still preparing our children for what they are actually facing right now?

We all know that this is serious stuff and it is happening right now in real time. It has very little to do with the recent election. This is on us. And I think that is precisely the point that Jesus is making here. This is on us. Thank you for participating in this Eucharist today. Thank you for devoting your lives and energy and decisions to preparing your family for the world that is unfolding even as I speak. And remember—it does not all depend on you. Give God the time and give God the opening to be the help you need the most. Let his grace remind you and thus prepare you.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.