

I was a freshman in high school when I realized that I couldn't see as well as I used to. It was difficult to see the whiteboard in class, hitting a baseball was even more of a challenge than it usually is, and I was concerned about failing my upcoming permit exam because I couldn't read the little letters on the chart, with the exception of the big E at the top. And even then, I'll put it this way: it's helpful to know that the chart starts with E because even if you couldn't see it clearly, you still could get one letter right.

So after weeks of trying to sort this out on my own and hoping that it would just get better, I told my parents that I needed to see an eye doctor, who told me what I had already known to that point: I couldn't see very well. Curious, I asked the doctor why my eyes were all of the sudden so bad. The doctor told me that my eyes were not properly refracting light back to my retina. Clearly, I didn't understand so he put it in more laymen's terms: my eyes weren't focusing on the right things.

With so much happening in this parable, it's easy to get focused on the wrong things. Ultimately, we know what Jesus is wanting us to do with this parable, but how we get there is a little less clear. We know there are 5 wise bridesmaids and 5 foolish ones; we know that at the end, the 5 wise are admitted into the wedding feast, while the 5 foolish are turned away. But as to why and to what makes one wise or foolish, the parable leaves it to us to sort it out. For example, it's tempting to conclude that this is a parable might be about keeping awake, as in literally not falling asleep. The parable ends that way after all. But what are we to do with that fact that all ten bridesmaids, both the wise and the foolish, fall asleep? Surely it can't be about the sleeping if both the wise and the foolish fall asleep.

But perhaps it's the extra oil. There's finally a difference between the wise and foolish that we can pick up on. The wise bring extra oil for their lamps and the foolish don't. Maybe it's a parable about being prepared and taking extra measures to make sure you and I are ready for the groom's arrival. But let me ask you something. When you go to a wedding, how many sets of clothes do you bring? Even if it's a weekend getaway, realistically, you don't need that many clothes, right? Maybe an outfit or two per day? And even two might seem excessive? Certainly you don't need to pack your suitcase to the gills for such a short stay. The question I raise about this parable is, can we really be too critical of the foolish bridesmaids for not lugging along extra flasks of oil? Is this a parable really about being over-prepared? I'm not so sure.

So let us consider a third option, one final detail that separates the wise from the foolish. Upon running out of oil, and being denied any of the extra by the wise bridesmaids, the foolish bridesmaids leave. They leave. Tasked with waiting for the groom, they leave their post, they forget their primary purpose and calling, and they leave because they, like the wise, have become convinced that the oil is the most important thing. The have

run out of oil and they rush out to get more, but why? What's the worst thing that can happen when they run out of oil? Will the groom not come if there are no lamps lit? No. Though the lamps cannot be lit, they are called to continue to wait for the groom, even in the dark. And ordinarily, the dark can be a scary thing, except when you know that the groom to come is none other than the light of the world. Their role as bridesmaids was not to make sure there was enough oil, but to await the arrival of the groom. Do you see? They have become focused on the wrong things.

I know that everyone is getting tired of this COVID pandemic. It got real old real fast and it's only gotten more tiresome. And we long for a return to some sense of normal – I'm with you. It's difficult to not be able to see family and friends as much, it's difficult to not be able to celebrate the big life events and holidays in the ways we're accustomed to, it's difficult to not feel completely overwhelmed and anxious and frustrated and angry that we just can't get back to normal. Why can't we just worship like normal, have small groups like normal, gather together as a church family like normal? And the more this goes on the more it feels like the lamps we carry are flickering and fading and we are running out of energy, patience, oil.

But again, I submit to you that it isn't about the oil. COVID has shut down a lot of the ways we carry out ministry in our congregation, but it has not eliminated ministry, it has not shut down our task, our purpose, our calling. It never could. Our job as a church is not to keep the lamps lit, to keep programs and worship and groups running as usual; our calling is to patiently wait and bear witness to the God who shows up, even as the lamps fade and the shadows close in. Our purpose is the point to the one who has promised to be with us in and through all things – Emmanuel, the light of the world, Jesus the Christ, God with us. And I know that waiting isn't easy. Because contrary to popular belief, waiting is not the same as doing nothing. Waiting is active, it is full of anticipation and confidence and trust. Waiting means hope – hope that though the dying forces of evil in the world rage, we await the presence of God to fill us with peace. Waiting means that though the shadows lengthen and grow, light and the dawning of a new day is coming, if only we will remember our purpose and not flee. Waiting means knowing the promise of Emmanuel still rings true today.

For God is not with us only if we have everything prepared. God has not promised to be with us only if we get everything running back to normal. The promise of Emmanuel is that God is with us always, even when our worship and programs have changed, when it feels like the lamps are running low, and when we aren't quite sure what the future holds. Let us not lose focus on the one who has called us here. Let us not focus on our purpose. Instead, let us wait together, as a community, as a family, as people of faith, fixing our eyes on the promise of hope we have in Christ, who is with us in this time. Let us keep alert, knowing that God is with us,

calling us again into a future we cannot know, and yet, one in which we trust that nothing will stop the light from shining and new life arising. Amen.