

## "Good News! The World is Ending" by Rev. Ben Wyatt

One of the quirks of being an American who follows the lectionary calendar is that every November, right when elections are happening, we are reading the apocalyptic parts of the Bible. So friends, whether you woke up jubilant, dejected, or just plain confused this morning, Jesus Christ has good news for you: the world is ending.

Perhaps you chuckle at that statement, and that's understandable. In our time, anything apocalyptic has come to be associated with cults and Kool-Aid drinking and fiery damnation for all but a chosen, insufferably self-righteous few: hardly the stuff of good news. But it wasn't always like that. In fact, both Mark and Matthew think Jesus' apocalyptic message is *so* good, and *so* important, that they think it sums up Jesus' entire message. They summarize Jesus' preaching as having two main themes: the kingdom of God has come near, and repent.

In other words, "get ready, because the world as you know it is about to change forever."

And in today's Gospel we find Jesus spending his final sermon, shortly before his crucifixion, giving some more details as to how this whole apocalyptic changing of the world thing is going to happen. There are a couple of really important details in this parable, but the one that strikes me the most is how *vulnerable* these bridesmaids are; how wholly dependent they are upon the bridegroom to show up, because they don't know when to expect him, and they don't have any way of finding out his whereabouts before he appears.

That's a good analogy for where we are, is it not? We are still in the grips of an unconceded presidential race, with recounts in key states and the possibility of further legal challenges ahead, wondering how it will play out; we wait for news of a COVID vaccine with no clear answers as to when one will be available, and when life can get back to "normal"; and all that on top of the normal waiting and powerless wondering that we have to do in our lives – for medical test results to tell us if our blood and hearts and bones and cells are healthy or sick, for our children to come home at night, to find someone to love.

Waiting, vulnerability, powerlessness: these are all part and parcel of our lives, and are often the hardest parts of our lives to deal with. They can stir up feelings of rage, of terror, or even despair. And so it is that Jesus gives us the good news that this world, in which our needs and vulnerabilities are so often met with rejection and pain, is passing away. You see, as Christians, we aren't ultimately waiting on the outcome of an election, or a diagnosis, or societal change: we are waiting for Christ to return in glory, bringing New Jerusalem out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, banishing all evil and wiping the tears from every eye.

And that means that our waiting is not in vain.

Because no matter what we endure in the waiting, what God is preparing for us is so extraordinary that it will make even the longest of waits seem like an instant, and the deepest of griefs no more than a distant memory. You know, when Jesus describes the world to come, there are two comparisons that he falls back on, over and over. One is to compare it to childbirth – a process that really, *really* hurts, *so* much so that many women who go through it find themselves thinking there could be nothing worse than this pain. Until the moment the baby arrives, and then all the pain is forgotten, swallowed up in the joy of the new life just begun. The other

comparison that he uses is a wedding feast, which is the one we read in this parable. And that, too, is apropos – after months of tedium and frustration and fighting with your future in-laws and your future spouse and wrangling responses out of guests and arguing over the color of the napkins and tension and nerves and fear and anticipation and feeling like you *cannot wait for this to be over*, the day arrives, and the party starts, and all that frustration fades into the background and you join in the dancing.

It's good news that the world is ending, because God promises that there's a better one coming to replace it. There's a second part to this good news: even if we are waiting, even if we don't *know* when the promised kingdom will arrive, we aren't completely powerless. We have the power to wait well.

See, this is what the wise bridesmaids know and the foolish ones don't: when you are unsure of the time, you need more oil, not less, to keep your lights bright. The light of faith needs to be sustained. And it's no mystery what sustains our faith: prayer, a clean conscience, regular reading of the Bible, and works of mercy. These practices are the backbone of our Christian life, and we vow to perform them at our baptism, and at our confirmation.

So in this time of waiting and wondering, dear friends in Christ, I invite us all to do some self-examination. How much oil do you have?

Have you set aside regular times for personal prayer with God? Is Christ real to you in your prayer? Does your prayer strengthen you?

Is your conscience clean? I don't mean that you aren't sinning at all – none of us, alas, are that advanced in the spiritual life. But perhaps there is some dark spot in your life that's been troubling you – some habit or relationship that you know isn't right, but haven't addressed yet. Is it time to talk with God about how to make a change? To “repent and return to the Lord,” as our confirmation liturgy puts it?

Are you making time to study the Bible, and to grow in the knowledge of God, as well as the love of God? Are you continuing in the apostle's teaching and fellowship?

And are you finding ways to do the good works God commands you to do? To seek and serve Christ in all persons? To strive for justice and peace? To respect the dignity of every human being? In other words, are you nourishing your faith by acting like it's true – like God really *does* love every single one of us?

I cannot promise that faithfully living out your Christian life will remove all anxiety or frustration. Trouble, alas, finds all of us in this life. What I *can* promise is that, if you ask yourself these questions honestly, and strive with seriousness to make a change, that you will be *so* much better equipped to handle the troubles that life brings you.

After all, lamps don't turn the night into day. But when the bridegroom calls at pitch-black midnight, they sure are helpful. So let's keep them well-supplied with oil, and trust that no matter how frustrating it is to wait with no end in sight or how terrifying our vulnerability is, with God's help we can have what we need to persevere to see the joyful reign of God made real.

Amen.