

Keep the Light On

Joshua 24: 14-25 Matthew 25: 1-13

I believe I've confessed my obsession with turning off lights and fans and devices due to my utter disgust with Duke Energy/Progress Energy. So that I don't ramble off on a rant, let it suffice to say that the company is a publicly sanctioned, government approved, greedy, corrupt, incompetent thief that turns the public accountability scolds remarkably quiet. That's all.

If someone leaves a room with the fan spinning like a helicopter, I'll shut the fan off; fans are pretty useless unless someone is there to enjoy the breeze. I would unplug things from the wall sockets, but I'm pretty sure my other family members would smother me in my sleep before long.

So, I am a substantial pain in the neck since if someone puts on the big overhead lights in the kitchen and leaves the room for a few moments, I'll come over and shut the lights off. Upon returning, whoever would have to put the lights back on again, usually shouting at me: "I was only gone for a minute; leave the light on, you nut-job!"

The reason that a beloved family member is complaining about my turning off the light is because they were active doing something. The light is on when someone is working. If I wasn't such a neurotic, I would keep the light on.

The people of the Exodus have concluded their long journey in the wilderness, coming to know God, sometimes in the most difficult and obdurate way possible. But they learned nevertheless that God is the one who is working for them, providing for them, ministering to them.

As we pick up the story in the book of Joshua, the twelve tribes have conquered the Promised Land and are transitioning leadership once again. Joshua is now old and retiring from his role, but he is aware that not everything is as it should be. He has some parting remarks which begin in the preceding chapter 23. Those remarks focus on reminding the leaders of the twelve tribes that it was the Lord your God who brought about their success, fulfilling God's own promise to them and to the ancestors back to Abraham himself. He warns them about making partnerships and alliances with surrounding nations, of adopting the ways of their cultures and religion. He warns that the God who provided can also become the God who takes away for their failure to follow the commandments of God's way.

This speech continues into chapter 24 until we come to its threshold moment. Joshua has not been dwelling on this subject of fidelity to the Lord their God for nothing. He knows full well that have already become syncretistic, mixing the gods of the people in the land with the Lord their God, mixing the alien practices and customs with the code of living that God has prescribed for his people. Joshua throws down the gauntlet.

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, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

They protest this accusation that they would serve other gods: *Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.* If we were to peer into Joshua's mind at this point, he would surely be thinking of the twelve leaders and saying to himself: "Weenies." They dutifully recount all that the Lord had done for them, just as Joshua had stated. They conclude: *We, too, will serve the Lord because he is our God.*

We have great confidence that Joshua was thinking of these leaders as "weenies" since he responds to their declaration saying: *You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.*

They continue their weenie cry: *No! We will serve the Lord.* To that, Joshua gives them orders: *Now then, throw away the foreign gods that are among you, and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.*

The weenies don't come out and say that they'll throw away their foreign gods since that would be tacit admission that they possessed them, and instead reaffirm: *We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.*

If you keep reading, you'll see that Joshua was so **un**-impressed with the avowal of faithfulness that he set up a stone to memorialize the occasion and serve as a lasting reminder of the promises made. Personally, I don't think the weenies ever threw away the foreign gods.

Nevertheless, Joshua did not want to see the great works of God done through Moses, and through Joshua himself, come undone because of the stupidity of succeeding generations.

God had kept the light on for God's people, literally during the Exodus period as a pillar fire by night, and figuratively in the way God fulfilled all of the promises made. God was working and making things happen for God's people, and these various events were just recounted by both Joshua and the weenie tribal leaders.

Now it was time for God's people to keep the light on, not simply to remember what God had done in the past, but to live into the covenant, living faithfully, righteously, and justly. In this, God's people would reflect the lessons and the history as well as the love and grace of their God, the whole reason that God would have a people of God's own. The people of God would be the light to the world, revealing the way and the will of the Creator, the sovereign God of all.

As you've surmised, the light is the presence and witness of the faithful to their God in the world. "Keeping the light on" means our practicing in discipleship and living in witness to the new life promise of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 25, Jesus is doing some final teaching of his own, as his arrest is imminent. The subject has turned to the end of the age which was thought to be imminent in Jesus' time, and among some in our time. As the questions about how and when the age will be fulfilled come to Jesus, he tells some parables to convey not only the uncertainty of the time, but the **irrelevance** of asking such questions.

In our passage, he is telling his audience about how the kingdom of God will be in those last days. The expectation, of course, is that the Messiah will return with a host from heaven to establish God's rule. What will this be like?

So Jesus tells them the parable about the ten virgins, five wise and five foolish, who have taken their lamps to a reception or meeting place to await the arrival of the bridegroom (i.e. the Messiah coming at the end of the age). Their lamps were probably a bit more elaborate than the one on the bulletin cover, inasmuch as they were more portable. But you get the idea; they're filled with oil which burns off the wick which lies in the oil. The same principle for our candles on the communion table; these cylinders that look like a wax candle are oil-filled and a wick floats in the oil which travels naturally up the wick, soaking the wick.

There is a distinction made by Jesus between the virgins. There are the wise or practical ones, the Marthas if you will, who have the presence of mind to grab a flask of extra oil in case they have to wait a long time for the bridegroom.

Then there are the five foolish virgins, the blondes if you will, who are fussing about their nails, their hair, their shoes, and their eyes, grab a lamp and head out the door. The foolish virgins are likely pre-occupied with everything else about this upcoming event. They're focused entirely on how they might look, who might be at the event, how they're going to get to the event, so intent on these speculations that they've neglected a key fact. They really don't know the day or hour of the bridegroom's arrival, and these bozos haven't thought past how they look and what the agenda is for the party.

As the parable unfolds, it seems there had been some sort of delay and the bridegroom is set to arrive late during the night. All ten virgins spring into action, grabbing their lamps and lighting them in anticipation. But the five blondes realize that their lamps are now low on oil, that they don't have enough to wait until the hour when the bridegroom is expected.

They turn to their counterparts and say ever so nicely, "Why don't we share the oil with each other so that we can all be helpful to the bridegroom on this important event?" To this invitation, the wise ones smile sweetly and reply, "Buzz off! Get your own!"

The five blondes wandered around the mall trying to find the oil store, getting distracted by Belks and Penneys and the jewelry counter and Victoria's Secret. By the time they returned with the oil for their lamps, the bridegroom had already arrived and the party had started. Now the banquet hall door was shut tight; no admittance. The five blondes didn't get in after all.

Again, like I said last week, Matthew is writing several generations after Jesus to the church community in which he is situated. In Matthew's day, there were plenty of folks who were awaiting the second coming of Jesus, who were making sure they were in good shape for the final judgment, who saw all kinds of signs that the time was ripe and the coming was imminent. They were like the blondes who never focused on what they needed to focus on, the work of ministry, the witness of love, grace and compassion. These folks waiting for the end didn't keep the light on; they let it go out as they focused on the wrong thing, neglecting what Jesus had taught, what God desired.

Now I know that no one here is sitting around waiting for the imminent return of Jesus, and there are no blondes here who would forget to bring extra oil for their lamps. But we are nonetheless expected to keep the light on, to be witnesses to the living Christ, ministering as his body in the world today. When we miss the opportunity to serve, to heal, to bring hope, to give witness to new life, then the light is off and darkness is able to prevail.

May we join with Joshua in affirming that we will serve the Lord our God and God alone, being obedient to our Lord and Savior in bringing a faithful witness to the world that stands lost in darkness. May we keep the light on, the oil lamps filled, sharing the strength of faith and love and compassion that reflects Jesus, the Messiah who comes to the darkness with good news, with us.