

Proper 27A: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25, Psalm 70, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

During the weeks between All Saints (last week) and the beginning of Advent (three weeks from today), we enter a short period that is sometimes referred to as Kingdomtide. We've been making our way through Matthew since the first Sunday of Advent last year and now, as we approach the end of the year, Jesus's parables, stories, sermons and conversations about the kingdom of heaven take on an urgent tone. There's no time to lose. Stay ready. Keep awake. Now, I want to be clear that for all those involved with the Holiday Market over the past months, weeks, days, and yesterday who feel a little drowsy and might even be looking forward to a quiet afternoon of snoozing: you have earned it! The gospel admonition to stay awake does not apply (fingers crossed) until after we've all taken a few naps this week to recover from yesterday's incredible Holiday Market.

The kingdom of heaven will be like this: Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. This particular description of the kingdom of heaven—is puzzling, not just because of the harsh judgement it seems to render, but because (let's face it) what's this about ten bridesmaids and one bridegroom? Sometimes it is really hard to get inside a parable and see how it pertains to us. We are burdened by the heaviness of what is going on in the world. Hope seems elusive. The time change this week means that it now gets dark earlier. Into our world comes this parable about little lamps and oil. There is another ancient story that is told in celebrations of Diwali or Deepavali, which is going on right now, that involves oil lamps. Diwali is known as the Festival of Lights because of the oil lamps. Sometimes deeper understanding comes through other stories. While it is a completely different story from a completely different tradition, the Diwali story compliments and illuminates the parable.

One version of the Diwali story begins like this: *Long ago, the world was menaced by a ten-headed beast whom the gods could not control. He was called Ravana: He who makes the universe scream...He was all-powerful, and he trained his army of warriors...to take what they wanted and to destroy anything in their path.* One day, Ravana's warriors came to the forest where Prince Rama lived with his beloved and wise wife Sita, and kidnapped Sita. Unbeknownst to her captors, as she was being carried off, she took off the pieces of jewelry she was wearing and, one by one, dropped them, leaving behind a trail of jewels, so that Prince Rama might be able to find her. Unfortunately, Prince Rama did not see the jewels and so he searched high and low for Sita without any clue of what had happened. After about a year of searching, he was sitting in the forest, in despair, when Hanuman, a forest-dwelling creature in the form of a monkey, found him. When Rama told Hanuman how Sita had disappeared without a trace, Hanuman showed him a jeweled bracelet he had found hanging from a tree. Hanuman wanted to help Prince Rama, so he asked all the monkeys and their friends, the bears and the bear king to join the search for the jewels that would lead them to the princess.

They ended up at the edge of a vast sea. Far away, in the middle of the sea, was Ravana's island kingdom. They finally knew where Sita was, but had no idea how to cross the sea to rescue her. They were standing at the shore's edge, again in despair,

knowing that time was short, when Hanuman and Prince Rama both saw a *tiny spider kick a grain of sand into the water at Prince Rama's feet. Hanuman laughed at this little action, but Rama said, "There is no such thing as large or small when it comes to acts of love.* Spiders, Monkeys, bears, and hundreds of other animals from the forest began helping Prince Rama pile up many, many grains of sand and small stones until finally they created a path across the sea to Ravana's island kingdom. Prince Rama and his companions defeated Ravana to free Princess Sita, but they weren't home yet. They had to walk across all of India to return home and, as they walked, people all along the way lit oil lamps for them, thousands and thousands of lights, to guide them on their long journey home. (Italicized words come from *Hanuman* by Erik Jerndresen and Joshua M. Greene)

Over the past many months we have heard parable after parable about how to find our way home. And now today, again, as we enter this short, intense season of Kingdomtide, here is another one. I do not know why anyone—foolish bridesmaids or not—would bring their lamps, but not bring a little flask of oil. They had everything they needed except the fuel to keep the lamps burning. Did they believe the wait would be short? Or had they already lost hope that the bridegroom was ever going to come? There is something about the story of Prince Rama *and* this parable that speak to the question of hope. To those times in this world and in our lives when there is so much sorrow and loss and uncertainty that life is at its hardest. When it seems as though, like Prince Rama, we've been searching forever with no breakthrough or, like the bridesmaids, we've been waiting forever for the moment when our hearts will sing with love again. We search and wait for all sorts of things: healing, reconciliation, peace, forgiveness, joy. Just when it seems as though we've found our way, we're standing on a shore looking across a huge expanse of water, without the slightest idea how the path will be built, or waiting, again, while the bridegroom gets delayed.

What stands out about the trimming of the wicks and the little flask of oil is that they, like the spiders and the little grain of sand, are such small details and creatures—and yet they are what make the difference. The story of Diwali and this parable of Kingdomtide indicate that we make our way home to the banquet feast to which we are all invited by tending to the small. And if we see the lamps as a metaphor for tending to the light and warmth of Christ's love within ourselves and others and in this world, then every time that happens, the power of that which makes the universe scream is defeated. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, quite memorably and apt for today: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." The time for showing and being light and love is indeed urgent and for right now.