

Pentecost 22, Proper 27. November 9 2014. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Amos 5: 18-24, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25: 1-13

I remember when I was interim rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, Bedford Indiana – that's "The Stone City," incidentally – all of the limestone used in Washington D.C. for the major buildings – including the National Cathedral – came from Bedford – I remember driving the twenty-five miles down from Bloomington to Bedford one hot summer day to prepare for an evening meeting and – about half-way down – passing an open field with a huge tent in it. Lots of cars around the edges. And a big sign: "**Revival today!**" Yup! They still do tent revivals in Indiana! So I decided I had enough time to stop. They were very welcoming – the preacher was just beginning. So I went inside and sat at the back. The passage was (to use his language) about "the five wise and five foolish virgins" (the Latin word is "vir-g-ino;" the Greek word "parthano" – which actually means "young woman," not "virgin" – but I let that pass!).

I stayed about 20 minutes. Everything was about hell-fire and damnation. "Repent or you'll burn in eternity!"

Today's readings invite some reflection on endings, don't they? And I think that makes us a little nervous! My brother had a way of lightening that mood – he came home one day with a T-shirt that said in big letters, surrounded by flames, "Be alert!!" When you got closer there were smaller letters: "the world needs more lerts."

If I had to characterize today's readings I'd say that they all focus on the practical implications of following the one true God. In the end, what we hold onto shapes our character and relationships with others, so if we're holding onto the wrong things, well, "Houston, we have a problem!"

All the readings say the same thing: believing in God isn't enough; the ways we believe, who we believe in, and what we do as a consequence – those things determine who we are and how we live.

So being self-aware; knowing the ways we believe, who we believe in, turns out to be really important, because it determines what we do as a consequence. Who is the God who commands our loyalty? Because if we embrace unhealthy images of God and the values they promote we can hardly be said to be living a Godly life.

One of the great theologians of the 20th Century, Paul Tillich, saw our god-visions in terms of our **ultimate concern**, that is, what we are willing to live or die for, the primary objects of our loyalty. What we worship and treasure shapes our character. Anything that demands exclusivity or primacy focuses our spirit. Placing the one God above all others through prayer AND action orders our lives and enables us to live globally as well as locally; it allows us to transcend the individual ego and embrace larger visions that benefit the common good.

All the readings reflect on the way we express ourselves through our faith, they identify what we make our Ultimate Concern:

Amos objects to shallow religion – people just going through the motions of faith without the substance of faith. Genuine faith, according to Amos, begins with working for justice, and living in a right orientation toward God. Prayer without action is **not** faith. Action without prayer isn't either.

The reading from Thessalonians is about hope, not world-destroying apocalyptic. Death and grief were real in the early church just as they are today. Denial is not the answer, nor is the suppression of our pain. Healthy grief comes from a vision of reality in which we affirm that our times are in God's hands and that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We can grieve, cry, yell, and swear, knowing that God is with us, treasuring our feelings and memory of those we loved. Moreover, the future is in God's hands; there isn't really an end but a great transformation, something that's the prelude to God's everlasting adventures.

The whole of Matthew's 25th chapter counsels preparation and wakefulness. We like to kid ourselves that we can second-guess the future, but the reality is that what will happen even a minute from now is beyond our ability to know. We never know when – in Matthew's language – the bridegroom will come and we will be called upon to act in ways consonant with our calling – that moment is mentioned only vaguely. I've often thought that in this context, vagueness is actually a good thing! Vagueness inspires us to see every encounter as holy, to see every encounter as an opportunity to love God by loving God's children.

Do you notice that all the young women fail here? Yes, there are five who are ill-prepared. But when offered the opportunity to be generous, the other five are unwilling to share. The point, I think, is that our preparations will never be perfect, so let's give up on that right now, give up on the parochial insider-outsider split and think rather in terms of loyalty to each other, in spite of the different ways we end up failing each other.

In the end, it's not how good we are when all is well, it's how we treat each other when we each find different ways to fall on our faces – and we all do that more often than we wish.

So be alert! Be wakeful! Be ready through prayer and action, action and prayer, to respond to God's call into the grace-filled life of the community of Jesus Christ.

And hold onto your hats! It's likely to be a wild ride!