Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

November 12, 2023

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KEEPING HOPE ALIVE Matthew 25:1–13

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids (in Greek the word is “virgins”) is not easy to interpret. Scholars are divided on its origins. Some think that Jesus originally told the story as an encouragement to be watchful and alert to the ways in which God seeks to enter our lives and the life of our world. Others believe that the parable has been modified by the writer of Matthew’s Gospel to fit the church context of his time. We need to recall that the early Christian followers of Jesus believed in a Second Coming that would take place right away after his death and resurrection. They expected Jesus to return to the world again, this time to make all things right. That, as we know, did not happen. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, around the years 60 to 70 C.E., Christians were giving up any hope of Jesus returning to them. There was a growing concern that this would have a negative effect on the Christian community, simply because people would be tempted to leave the faith.

This is the context in which Matthew tells the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. He turns the parable into an allegory in which the bridegroom represents Jesus. Just as the bridegroom of the story has been delayed in arriving to the wedding banquet, so has Jesus. The story, then, could well have been written to urge the followers of Jesus not to give up hope, but instead be prepared and alert and watchful for his coming once again into the world. They must keep oil in the lamps so that they will be prepared to go out and meet him when he arrives. They are not to be like the foolish bridesmaids who are unprepared and have given up any hope that the bridegroom will come.

Now, what can we do with this story? After 2000 years Jesus still has not come, and I suspect that most of us, including me, smile just a little when we see the sign “Jesus Coming Soon” on the top of the Jesus Coming Soon Church as we drive into town from the airport. I once saw that church being tented for termites, and I smiled and thought to myself: “I guess they think that Jesus will come soon, but just in case he doesn’t, they are wise to fumigate their church building.” Perhaps tenting their church was a way for them to keep oil in their lamps. I just thought of that this week.

I invite us this morning to take a different approach. Perhaps we should no longer interpret the story as did Matthew by making the bridegroom to represent Jesus in a literal way. Instead, we could ask ourselves: “How can we keep our hope alive that God will choose to enter our lives and the life of our world?” “Are there signs of God’s presence in our world that can cause us to rekindle our hope that the will of God will prevail on earth as it is in heaven, as the Lord’s prayer pleads?”

Perhaps you will agree with me that our society and our world is not the society and world of our longing. In our society, we witness a tragic deterioration of what we once knew as a civil society. Witness the increasing violence that our West side neighbors along the Wai’anae Coast and we here in the city have been experiencing. Witness the way people pass by each other on the street without any acknowledgment of each other’s presence. Not even a smile. Fear reigns in our streets. And then there is the political polarization we are all witnessing. Donald Trump is now promising a weaponization of the Justice Department that will allow him to seek revenge on his perceived enemies, if he returns to the White House. In the face of all that is taking place in our society, do we just give up and say that it will always be this way? Will we say that what we hope for will never come? Indeed, Is there any hope for our society?

And then, to make matters worse, there is the shadow of death and violence that seems to cover our world. The war between Israel and Hamas is the prime example these days. Over 1200 Israelis have lost their lives and over 11,000 Palestinians, nearly half of them children, have been killed thus far in Gaza, and the death toll just keeps rising.

Amid all this death and sadness, are there any signs of hope we can see and embrace? This past week, I undertook a search for any signs of hope. And perhaps by the Spirit, I was led to an article written by a Jewish writer, Ari Daniel, an NPR reporter, entitled *“The Israel-Hamas war has not quashed their compassion, their empathy, their hope.”* (NPR, November 3, 2023)He speaks of four people, and I will mention two of them. Maoz Inon, a Jewish citizen of Israel, “no longer sleeps well at night. His loss is too great,” writes Ari Daniel. Maoz Inan lost both of his parents when Hamas carried out its violence in Southern Israel on October 8. Their home was burned to the ground by Hamas and their charred bodies were discovered by neighbors. To deal with his grief, Maoz swims for forty minutes each morning in the Mediterranean Sea. He says that the vast sea reminds him of his vast grief and his unending sea of tears and yet for him it is healing. He refuses to become filled with rage and thoughts of revenge. He cries a lot, but when he cries, his tears are not just for his parents or himself. In his own words, “I was crying, and I’m still crying, for all the innocent victims from both sides that will die” “And I’m crying for this 100 years of bloodshed, this cycle of death.” He says that the cycle of death can seem endless, but he has hope. “It seems like there is no solution,” he says, “but there is.”

He chooses to do his part. Before the violence, he opened a small hotel in Bethlehem, which publicly and openly caters to both Jews and Palestinians. When they are at his hotel, they not only co-exist side by side; they actually interact and co-mingle and eat together. As a result, he has both Jewish and Palestinian friends. After the war began, Maoz Inon had a vision in the middle of the night. He awoke in tears. “And I saw an image of everyone crying,” he recalls. “Just we all cry —you cry, your daughter cry, everyone. And our tears are healing the wounds from Israelis and Palestinians. And our tears wash the blood.” Maoz Inon is surely a sign of hope.

As is Dr. Lina Qasem Hassan, a Palestinian citizen of Israel who as a physician treats Jewish patients in Haifa. Dr. Hassan got bad news when a relative of hers who drives an ambulance in Gaza was killed in an Israeli airstrike. This, however, did not stop her from going to Southern Israel to treat Jewish citizens and victims from the Hamas attack. In treating them, she encountered their pain and their suffering, even as she mourned her Palestinian people who were by then losing their lives in Gaza. At least, she says, the Israeli victims of the Hamas attack had names. The Palestinian victims of Israeli bombs and gunfire do not. Dr. Hassan has not given up hope that there can be a new day for both Israelis and Palestinians. She wants to go to Gaza as soon as possible to treat her people who have been wounded. She, like Maoz Inon is a sign of hope in our world.

And then I thought of my own neighborhood, especially in the days after my brother Ian’s death in Nova Scotia this past Tuesday. Something in me is leading to appreciate the gift Ian was to us and also the gift of being alive as I recall the good and lovely memories of my brother and the times we spent together both in Nova Scotia and here in Hawai’i. For several years Ian came to spend three months with Leilani and me in our home, and also to be with our sister Katherine, his nieces Christy and Mairi and his nephew Iain, and their families. And I said to myself: “Our lives here in Pu’unui have been filled with such joy and unexpected surprises. How can I keep from singing.”

I think of a newfound and growing friendship I have with a neighbor. His name is Karl Yamasaki. Karl is a Vietnam veteran who lives alone in his family home, the home in which he was raised, on Wyllie Avenue. He has a wonderful yard, complete with lots of plants and a marvelous Mountain Apple Tree, the fruit of which he gladly shares with his neighbors. His enclosed yard has become a meeting place for dog owners and their pets. There, neighbors, both friends and strangers, meet each other just as their pets do. Besides their dogs, they too have names. It is a wonderful, peaceful, gentle, friendly place that Karl makes possible for us all. He is a sign of hope in our society that is becoming more and more callous and harsh and cruel.

Oded Adomi Leshem, a political psychologist at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, has this to say about the nature of hope. He says that hope is not like conflict, which can be so familiar, so predictable and so very brutal. Hope is different, he says. It’s unfamiliar and unpredictable. He says that we can “accept this unpredictability,” and “take a chance on this uncertain thing” called hope. In the context of the Israeli-Hamas war, he says, hope is called “peace between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea,” and it is possible, perhaps not now, but one day. We need to be prepared, alert and watchful for such a peace.

My friends, let us be realistic about our world. It is in bad shape. We cannot shy away from the harshness, the violence, the cruelty, and the death we encounter every day here and elsewhere. At the same time, as followers of Jesus and as the children of God, let us not allow the darkness to overwhelm us and sink us into apathy and despair. Let us rely on each other for support and encouragement. Let us do what we can to humanize our world. Let us keep oil in our lamps. Let us keep prepared, alert and watchful for the coming of God into our midst. Let’s keep hope alive in our hearts and our lives. Let us continue to discover those signs, large and small, that serve to keep us hopeful in these days full of trouble, and also as we long for that day when, in the words of the prophet Habakkuk, “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.” (Habakkuk 2:14) O God, may it be so.

I close by sharing a prayer Josie Ing shared with us last Wednesday at the close of our Lectionary Study.

*Dear God, please give us the strength to empathize*

*with those who are suffering, while also holding*

*space for ourselves to feel deeply and process*

*everything that is happening in the world right*

*now. May we strive for peace in our hearts and*

*minds and believe that common humanity will*

*prevail. Amen.*