2/20-21/21 Lent in Plain Sight: Oil Rev. Amy Haines

Mt 25:1-13- NRSV

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he used everyday objects to teach about God’s kingdom ways.

A mustard seed. A pearl. A fig tree. Light. Salt. Bread.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he used unexpected people to share the grace and compassion of God. A good Samaritan. The prodigal’s father. A persistent neighbor.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he used stories about weddings and banquets to encourage his followers to be ready and to reach out to their neighbors.

Consider in your faith journey how often the ordinary of life became a means of grace for you.

Bread broken for communion. The hug of a compassionate friend. Song lyrics that encourage. A scripture that spoke to your heart. Sunbeams. Cards. Ocean waves.

Last Wednesday night we began the season of Lent with our Ash Wednesday service. In that service we were reminded of our mortality through common elements of ashes, dust, and masks. We were also reminded of God’s grace through elements of grain and cup, through bread and wine, through crackers and water.

Lent is a journey, an intentional 40-day journey of repentance and renewal that prepares us to receive the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. This Lent, instead of lamenting, which we have done a lot of over the past year, I invite you to a season of claiming God’s promises, promises of grace and new life, promises of presence and calling, promises of forgiveness and persistence.

Today, we begin the journey of Lent reflecting on the ordinary element of oil.

In the time of Jesus, olive oil was a precious commodity. It was used in worship; it was used in food preparation; it was used as fuel to keep lamps burning; it was used as an antiseptic; it was used for anointing. Because of its many uses, oil was treated as valuable. It was not given away, but was sold and bought and bartered for.

In our time, there are many more types of oil present in our lives, which may or may not affect us on a daily basis. Consider how much you travel by car. Good car maintenance requires gas in the tank and oil in the system in order for the car to run well. How many pieces of furniture do we own that have an oil finish? Heating oils are used in cooking. If you are a baker, have you ever begun to bake a cake and halfway through the recipe realized you did not have enough oil or eggs to complete the cake batter? If you like to eat salads, vinaigrettes are popular as salad dressing, a mixture of oil and vinegar. Essential oils are used for a wide array of healing purposes.

Oil is still a part of our ordinary lives. And today, I invite you to consider how oil can teach us to be ready for God’s presence in our lives.

When our worship services first went fully virtual last Lent, and then again when we expanded back to three services in June, you may have noticed that we struggled to keep the altar candles burning throughout the services. Sometimes they would work well for one service, then one would not light the next service. Sometimes they burned bright and high, and sometimes they burned light and low.

We finally realized that our weekly routine had been interrupted, and thus the oil in our candles was not being replenished on a consistent basis. They weren’t built to be lit and stay lit without constant care.

In the time of Jesus, all lamps were lit by oil, which had to be replenished consistently in order to light up a room, a home, a path. Without oil, a person was left in the dark. Without oil, travel at night was restricted. Without oil, one was not prepared.

I compare the value of oil in a lamp long ago to a boy scout today having extra batteries for his headlamp in order to go on a night hike or even find his way around a tent late at night. After all, the scout motto is be prepared.

Our passage today from the Gospel of Matthew is a parable comparing the kingdom of heaven to bridesmaids who were and were not prepared.

Unlike modern western weddings, where the bride is the center of attention as she walks down the aisle, in middle eastern culture at this time the wedding began with the procession of the groom. When the groom was ready, the bridesmaids went to meet the groom and escort him back to the bride’s house. This was the beginning of a week’s worth of festivities centered around the wedding ceremony.

Timing however, like many places still today, was a flexible concept. Festivities happened when they were ready, not at an exact day and hour. The bridesmaids had to be ready for whenever the groom was ready, and if that meant they all took a power nap while waiting for him, since the groom’s procession happened at night, they slept.

Today’s parable focuses on the preparedness of the bridesmaids. When the groom arrived with a shout at midnight, five had enough oil to last the entire procession. Five did not. The five who did not have enough oil were considered foolish. A lack of wisdom and focus had them scrambling in the middle of the night to leave and find someone to sell them oil. Yet because of their foolishness, when they finally arrived at the wedding banquet, they were shamed and shut out. Since they had not been prepared for the groom’s procession, they would not be allowed to join in any of the celebrations.

The five who had extra oil with them, however, were honored for their preparations.

I like how Jill Duffield observes:

..This seems to be the only instance in the Bible where keeping extra of something is lauded.

Other passages say if you have two coats give one away; give away your shirt, too, if demanded of you. Don’t build barns to store up your grain, your life may be demanded of you this very night. But here the instruction requires holding something back, in reserve, just in case.

--Jill Duffield *Lent in Plain Sight* p.118-120

The bridesmaids who were prepared could not share with those who were not prepared or none of them would have enough oil for their lamps. While caring for others is laudable, there is a time for us to share, and a time for us to protect ourselves. There are values we can pass on to others, and values we can only live out in our own lives.

As this is a parable of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is reminding us that each one of us have to be ready for that moment at the end of our lives when we meet Jesus. The early Christians believed Jesus was returning in their lifetime, and so worked to be ready whenever Jesus came.

Now, over 2000 years later, we still believe Jesus will return, but we also need to be ready to meet Jesus whenever we die, whether after a long illness, after a long life, or suddenly at any age. We will never know the day nor the hour, so we are called to all be ready, to be prepared, to have enough oil in our lamps and faith in our hearts to hear God’s words of welcome at the end of our lives.

Lent calls us to a journey of readiness. At the end of Lent, how do we respond to the agony of the cross and the wonder of the empty tomb? Do we hear the stories of Jesus as good news for our lives, or do we dismiss Jesus’ sacrifice as irrelevant? How can oil remind us this week to be spiritually ready for the celebration of Easter?

The five bridesmaids who were ready to meet the bridegroom had to be inconvenienced to be prepared. Not only did they carry their lamps, they also carried an extra flask of oil. Not only were they listening for the groom’s arrival, they had to filter out any distractions in order to do so.

Sometimes living a life of faith is inconvenient. We wake up for worship instead of sleeping in.

We choose service over leisure. We intentionally give up a percentage of our finances for the work of the church. We tip generously at restaurants following worship so the wait staff don’t complain about those stingy church people. We are misunderstood by coworkers and even family members. We are mindful of our language. We choose kindness. We choose forgiveness.

We confess our sinful ways. We strive to be more like Christ.

There are many voices that seek to distract us from living like Jesus. They beckon us to look elsewhere for purpose and security, for affirmation and abundant life. They beckon us to be valued because of what we do for a living, or our status in the community, or our political affiliation, or our checkbook balance, or as teens how popular or athletic or smart we are.

These voices want us to focus on something other than Jesus, at least for the time being.

They entice us by saying we have plenty of time to get right with Jesus, plenty of time to confess and believe, plenty of time to refill our oil lamps, so to speak.

Live long enough, however, and you will know that these voices that draw us away from Christ know that our time is limited. We are all mortal. None of us will live forever. Are we willing to be inconvenienced in this life so that we live and learn and grow in faith, or are we willing to risk that later may or may not give us a second chance to say yes to Jesus before it is too late?

We are called to prepare, to be ready, in order to live for Christ now, and meet Christ for all eternity. When we allow oil to remind us to be ready, may we also allow oil to remind us that we have been anointed for such a time as this.

Oil has long been used as an anointing agent, poured over a head or marked in the sign of the cross for a blessing.

Our anointing may be physical. Each Ash Wednesday when we offer the imposition of ashes, those ashes are mixed with oil. We are anointed for the journey of Lent even as we recognize our own mortality as well as God’s grace.

When the prophet Samuel journeyed to Bethlehem to choose one of Jesse’s sons as the next king of Israel, he anointed the youngest with oil, pouring oil over David’s head as a sign of God’s blessing.

When the Good Samaritan stopped to assist a beat-up stranger on the road, he poured oil on the man’s wounds, an anointing of compassion and care.

Our anointing may be physical, but often is spiritual. This anointing becomes the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, washing over us to cleanse us and call us and give us the courage to step forward on a new path of faith.

After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, hearing the voice of God’s blessing, he was sent into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Only after that time of trial and temptation did he begin his ministry in the Galilee, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

At his home synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus proclaimed:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Lk 4:18-19)

Jesus was anointed for a specific purpose and ministry, to proclaim God’s kingdom ways through word and action, in love and sacrifice and service.

We here today can also look to oil to remind us that we, too, have been anointed and appointed to be God’s people in this world. Our Lenten journey reminds us to replenish the oil within us, the spirit of God flowing through us, the faith of Jesus that empowers us.

Only then can we live into what Jesus declared in Matthew 5:

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (5.14-16)

This Lent, what is the oil within you that needs to be replenished? This oil will be different person to person. This oil will be different Lent to Lent.

Do you need to spend more time in God’s Word, or more time in prayer? Do you need to be intentional in your generosity through your financial giving or through acts of service? Do you need to return to in-person worship, to gather with the community of faith, or be intentional in connecting with a spiritual friend each week? Do you need to begin each day with a simple reminder that you are loved, forgiven and freed for new life?

The journey of Lent has begun. A journey that takes us to the cross, and through the cross to the empty tomb, and through the empty tomb to a life lived following Jesus.

As we journey, may we replenish the oil within us that reminds us to be ready to follow Jesus.

As we journey, may we remember that we are anointed for this journey.

As we journey, may we be open to God’s presence in our midst.

As those who live into Psalm 23, following our Good Shepherd through dark valleys and beside still waters, in the presence of enemies and in the glory of God’s presence, may we live in such a way that God’s goodness and mercy continues to find us all the days of our lives, so we may dwell in the presence of God forever.

Amen and amen.