The Hymnbook of Hope

Matthew 25:1-13
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
November 8, 2026/Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost/Peace Sunday

Over the past year or so, I have (weirdly) become a crossword puzzle person. I do one pretty much every day. What can I say? The world is a strange place!

On Wednesday, one of the hints for the *New York Times* crossword was “Four out of three people struggle with this subject.”

The answer, of course, is “math.” I am squarely among those “four out of three” people. Nevertheless, I bravely did some math this week.

Over my time as a pastor, I discovered that I have done just under half as many weddings as funerals. I wish the math was not this lopsided, but it is.

There are many reasons for this ratio, but among them is the simple reality that fewer people are getting married these days. Death, on the other hand, still has a 100% track record.

Some want to marry but can’t find a suitable partner. Some are highly suspicious of the institution of marriage citing historical patriarchy, high divorce rates, etc. Some want to keep their options open. Some just prefer to live together as long as it works for both parties.

I understand *some* of the reticence towards marriage (but only some). I remain a big believer in the institution of marriage.

I would like to do more weddings than I do, not because I necessarily love officiating at them. Often, at a wedding, the pastor is more ornamental than anything at a wedding. Look tolerable for the photos, don’t mess up in any obvious way. Get the names right when you present the happy couple.

I would like to do more weddings than I do only because it would mean more people were committing themselves to lives of love and sacrifice and faithfulness and fidelity.

(As it happens, I will be doing at least four weddings over the next year, which will be the most I have ever done in a year).

I believe that marriage is a sacrament, one of the ways in which God's grace is mediated to us and through us into the world.

I think marriage is a metaphor for Christ's love for the church. The church is repeatedly described as "the bride of Christ."

Jesus' first "sign" in John's gospel took place at a wedding, where he turned water into wine to keep the party going.

And there are at least six distinct occasions in Jesus' teaching where he uses wedding or wedding-banquet imagery.

Including today's text from Matthew 25. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a wedding banquet. Or, just before a wedding banquet, to be more precise.

He talks about ten "young women" or "bridesmaids" or "virgins," depending on your English translation.

We'll get to these ten young women in a minute, but it's worth pausing at the outset to compare and contrast a first-century Jewish wedding with one in our time. There are some fairly important differences.

In our time, a wedding can be anything from two people showing up alone at a courthouse to a wildly elaborate, expensive party at an exotic destination to everything in between.

Increasingly, church weddings are out of fashion and destination weddings are in. People aren't necessarily getting married in the place that they will live or either of their families are from.

Ceremonies are often tailored to the preferences of those getting married. The vows are often highly personalized and sometimes seem to be little more than expressions of adoration and affection rather than genuine promises to one another.

(I don't have many non-negotiable when it comes to weddings I officiate at, but one of them is that couples have to use traditional vows. "In sickness and in health, for better or worse, for richer for poorer, as long as we both shall live," etc." Because I know that every couple will face these things and expressions of adoration alone won't be up to the task of sustaining a love that can weather these storms. But I digress.)

There could be a dance (or not).
There could be speeches (or not).
There could be slide shows of the couple (or not).
There could be a signing of the legal marriage certificate (or not).
The officiant could be a pastor or a priest. Or not (in Alberta, pretty much anyone over eighteen can be a "temporary marriage commissioner," as long as they apply three months in advance).
There could be a break in the middle for the most important part of the wedding—the photos! Or not.

In sum, in our time, weddings—when we still have them—are increasingly a kind of do-it-yourself affair and heavily focused on the individual preferences of the couple.

This is not what a wedding would have looked like in Jesus' time.

Back then, a wedding was generally a community-wide celebration lasting several days, involving family, neighbours, food, wine, music, dancing, and considerable anticipation. It was about the couple, certainly, but it was also about the joining of two families.

These events often began with the groom leaving his home to fetch the bride from her father's house. This was followed by a lamp-lit procession through the streets to the the wedding banquet.

The young women in Jesus' parable were likely bridesmaids or torchbearers whose role was to greet the groom and escort him to the celebration.

And they would have been expected to carry their own oil lamps to light the way. Because travel times and preparations were often unpredictable, the groom's arrival could be delayed until late at night, making it essential for to have extra oil to keep their lamps burning.

This is the context in which Jesus tells a parable about five wise young women and five foolish young women. Five have enough oil for a long wait, five do not. Five have made preparations for the celebration that is to come, five have not. Five are granted entrance to the banquet, five are not.

The math is not difficult, nor is the point Jesus is making. It is about watchfulness, anticipation, attention.

It is about, to borrow Jesus' words, "keeping awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour" when the kingdom will come in its fullness, and the wedding banquet will begin.

///

So, attention. To what will we attend and how will we attend to it?

Paying attention, attending well, has never been easy. Why else would Jesus tell this story?

But I think it is particularly difficult in the digital age. We live, many have noted, in what is increasingly being referred to as "the attention economy."

Once we lived in agrarian economies where what was valuable or scarce was land and food. Then there was a transition to the industrial economy, driven by labour, capital, and machinery. This was followed by the consumer economy, characterized by purchasing power. Next came the information economy where information and knowledge became the drivers.

(These all blend together of course—it's just a rough way of describing cultural trends.)

In the last decade or so, human attention has become the most valuable commodity. The basic idea is simple: when information is abundant, attention becomes scarce.

There is more *content* available on the little machines in our pockets than any human being could ever possibly consume.

And so, businesses, media companies, social media platforms, and even political movements compete for the limited amount of attention people have to give.

The competition is no longer simply about getting us to buy things. It's about getting us to look, listen, click, watch, read, react, and stay engaged.

And in the attention economy, it seems to me that our attentions are shrinking and being directed toward unworthy things.

We increasingly live in a world where many spend their days absently scrolling through AI generated slop engineered to keep us tethered to our devices and to make obscenely wealthy corporations even wealthier.

A world where we increasingly can't tell the difference between what is real and what isn't (and often don't care). A world where the vulgar and the stupid and the immediate and the sensational and the outrageous inevitably float to the top of our screens and, therefore, our attention.

It's hard to be watchful and attentive for the kingdom of God (or anything, really!) when our attention spans have been whittled down to the length of a reel on Instagram.

How will we cultivate the patience and the spiritual discipline to be watchful when our brains have been hijacked by algorithms designed to batter us with automated garbage and to incentivize our worst instincts?

///

So, our digital context certainly works against the watchful, hopeful attentiveness Jesus says is necessary for the kingdom.

I think there are other reasons why we don't make sure we have enough oil for when the bridegroom arrives.

The journey of faith and life can sometimes seem long and hard. The bridegroom is delayed. God doesn't always act on our schedule, you may have noticed.

Sometimes, waiting can just be really hard.

What does faithfulness look like when God seems delayed? What sustains hope when the promised future doesn't arrive on our preferred schedule? And how do we prepare for God's future without knowing when it will come?

What does it mean to live attentively to God's kingdom?

I think it's actually simpler than we think. Jesus spells it out in his life and teaching.

To be watchful people who are prepared for the kingdom is to be:

- People of mercy in a culture of instant, often quite self-righteous judgment.
- People of forgiveness in a culture where we are conditioned to nurse and weaponize our pain.
- People of love—like *actual* love, faithful, committed, sacrificial, patient love—in a culture of casual romance and connections of convenience.
- People of faith and trust in a culture of cynicism.
- People of a determined hope in the kingdom that is coming in a culture that tends toward catastrophizing and despair.
- People of virtue in a culture that often celebrates vice.
- People of humility in a culture of superficial vanity.
- People of patience and prayer in a culture that demands a quick fix.
- People of presence in a culture of distraction.

And, on this Sunday before Remembrance Day, we remember that we are to be people peace in a culture addicted to violence.

Peace, not just as a position on war, not necessarily as a set of opinions on geopolitical conflicts, but as a way of being in the world, a way of relating to our neighbours, a way of negotiating polarized spaces.

Peace that embodies the kingdom that we believe is coming.

This is what it means to watch, to wait well, to pay proper attention. This is what it means to have oil in our lamps.

///

You may be wondering about the title of my sermon this morning, “The Hymnbook of Hope. It has nothing to do with a traditional hymnal or actual songs. I borrowed it from James K.A. Smith’s recent book *How to Inhabit Time.*

What he calls “the hymnbook of hope” is simply two refrains from Scripture that frame the Christian life and give shape to our waiting.

“How long, Lord.”
Maranatha! (“Come, Lord” or “Come, Lord Jesus”).

I want to quote Smith here because I think he says it well:

> “How long,” O Lord?” is the protest-question posed to God precisely because we’ve witnessed the inbreaking of the kingdom. So why, Lord, delay its distribution? The persistence of hunger and violence, racism and exclusion, greed and plutocracy, addiction and abandonment are all affronts to the restored creation we’ve already seen in the resurrected Jesus. “How long, O Lord?” is the question of a hopeful people precisely because we are expecting the world promised in the Christ event. The church is rightly impatient in this long pilgrimage. “How long, O Lord?” is the “Are we there yet?” of an eager people.
>
> *Maranatha!* (“Come, Lord!”) is a cry that is half plea and half imperative. Sometimes it is a cry for rescue: Come, Lord, and bring an end to these enduring injustices. Come, Lord, and save us from the henchmen of Mammon grinding the poor underfoot. Come, Lord, and rescue those drowning in the sea. At other times, *Maranatha!* is a hungry cry for more of the good we already enjoy: Come, Lord, and makes this fleeting joy permanent and stable. Come, Lord, and bind us together forever as we’ve experienced it in this moment. Come, Lord, and let your reconciliation ripple across the cosmos as we’ve just experienced in our community. More, please! Always! Forever!

“How long, O Lord?” and *Maranatha!* are both faithful expressions of a watchful people. They are both ways of keeping enough oil ready to light our lamps when the kingdom comes.

Smith goes on:

> The trick, the feat, the graced posture we are called to cultivate *on the way* is faithful labor in the present, rooted in discernment, always with our eyes on that coming city. I can still recall the lesson from my driver's ed class decades ago: "Aim high," the teacher told us. When you're driving, don't look immediately in front of you. If you're fixated on the immediate, your driving will always be reactive, and reactive drivers are dangerous drivers. While it might seem that they are perpetually on guard, in fact they are less able to absorb what's coming. Instead, aim high: look down the road and trust your peripheral vision. Let the way forward be guided by that longer view and you'll actually be a better driver. [1]

Looking further down the road also makes us more watchful and hopeful Christians.

But this does not mean we are to be obsessed with the end. Many Christians over the years seem to have thought about little else than the end of all things, fearfully obsessing over dates and obscure interpretations of apocalyptic texts and predictions, and all the while paid insufficient attention to their actual lives here and now.

This is not the attentive watchfulness Jesus has in mind. One last quote from Jamie Smith who puts it better than I could:

> We sing *Maranatha!* but we are not a panicked people. As the writer Marilynne Robinson once said, "Fear is not a Christian habit of mind." That is not to condone apathy but rather to encourage hope, a way of labouring toward a future that arrives as a gift.[2]

May God help us not be a panicked people, but a people who are hopeful, watchful, joyful, and attentive to what matters, and ready for the party when it starts.

Amen.

⌖

---

[1] James K.A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 166-67

[2] Smith, 170.