

Sermon, October 11, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends from Marsh Mountain Consort, who are providing Special Music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases, COVID hospitalizations and deaths are again rising. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshiping together while staying safely apart. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps) Now today's stupid joke.

Not only is October celebrated all over the world as Scott's Birthday Month, it's also Pastor Appreciation Month. But I'm not stupid. I know not everyone appreciates pastors. Just last year this month I was shaking hands at the door after the service, when an older visitor came up to me and said, "Pastor, your sermon today reminded me of the peace of God, and the steadfast love of God."

I said, "How flattering! Thank you! But tell me, how exactly did my sermon remind you of God's peace and God's steadfast love?"

And she said, “Well like God’s steadfast love, your sermon seemed to endure forever. And like God’s peace, it surpassed all understanding.”
Ouch.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

Lord of the feast, you have prepared a table before all peoples and poured out your life with abundance. Call us again to your banquet. Strengthen us by what is honorable, just and pure, and transform us into a people of righteousness and peace, through Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord. Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the twenty-fifth chapter. O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-second chapter.

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'

But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'

Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

I'm in my sixteenth year as the pastor of St. Mark's, and it has been my honor and privilege to officiate at more than a few weddings. Many pastor friends tell horror stories about the weddings they've conducted, but not me. Not to jinx it, but truth is, mine for the most part have pretty much turned out great!

A lot of my weddings have been outdoors, yet not once has it been too cold or too hot and we have never been rained on. Well, except for my goddaughter's wedding a couple of years ago, but it was just a few drops, which managed to cool things off a bit on an otherwise muggy day.

Nobody has even fainted at one of my weddings, and I have yet to lose the license or get the bride's name wrong. I've officiated at several beautiful outdoor weddings, including at the Overlook on Cooper's Rock, on the shores of Deep Creek Lake, including one at the yacht club; in private backyards, and in a beautiful field by a pond. I've celebrated outdoor nuptials at the famous Bedford Springs Hotel, the North Glade Inn, and on a beautiful mountain top golf course. I conducted a wedding while standing on the Fairfax Stone, where I was standing in three different West Virginia counties at once. I was really looking forward to officiating at our niece Kristi's wedding in Pensacola, Florida yesterday. Unfortunately, COVID-19 had other plans.

I've officiated at indoor weddings not only here, but also at St. Paul's in Aurora and at the Oldtown, Maryland V.F.W. I'm sure I told you about that one. The wedding was right in the bar, with guests sitting around tables and on their regular bar stools, with some folks smoking cigarettes and drinking beer throughout the ceremony.

I confess that felt a little awkward, but I love Nancy and Mike, and apparently folks down at Oldtown are still talking about it. In fact, they say it was the most spiritual event to take place at the Oldtown V.F.W. since the Tractor Pull.

A friend of mine was a professional photographer, and he can tell you some wedding horror stories. One couple had a ton of friends and co-workers and both came from large local families, so they didn't even bother to put RSVP on their invitations, trusting the crowd would be huge. They booked a church that seated 600 people and reserved the entire Cumberland Country Club for the reception.

Problem was, it was July 4th weekend, and lots of people already had other plans. In the end the wedding Party numbered twenty people. But only about a dozen guests showed up, spreading out among the six hundred seats of the church. My friend is pretty sure the bride didn't stop crying until long after the honeymoon.

I have shown the Adult Forum video clips of brides falling down and grooms passing out. Of couples tripping into the backyard swimming pool and photographers smashing their heads into sanctuary lamps. My favorite is the Catholic Priest who accidentally dropped a communion wafer down the front of the bride's dress, and then went after it.

Still I can't imagine a more horrible wedding in human history, than the one described today in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet from the Gospel of Matthew. First the invited guests didn't show. As I mentioned, that happens. But then the king got mad and sent out slaves to round them up. Not only did they **STILL** not come. They murdered the slaves sent to get them.

That made the king really mad, so he launched into a killing spree of his own, highlighted by arson, mayhem and murder.

The king then had people dragged-in off the streets to fill the banquet hall. But when one of those street people wasn't properly dressed, the king had him bound and tortured. Nice.

Now I know each wedding is unique in its own way, and that wedding etiquette has changed greatly over time and culture. But I still can't help but think in the case of this Parable of the Wedding Banquet, Martha Stewart would have been appalled. To me, the worst part of this story isn't even the horrific ending. It's the terrifying beginning. Where Jesus said, "The Kingdom of heaven is like...well, it's apparently like... this wedding banquet." Yikes.

Martin Luther didn't care much for the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. The Johns (Calvin and Wesley) weren't nuts about it either, and neither are any of the more contemporary commentaries I've read about this parable since.

Problem is, just about everybody interprets this parable as an allegory, where Pharisees and temple authorities are the ungrateful invited guests, Jesus is the Son getting married, leaving God in the role of wrathful and vindictive King. Seems no one is very comfortable with the notion that God in the end turns into an angry, vengeful warlord hell-bent on death and destruction. Is that the Kingdom we should look forward to? God I hope not.

But you know, I can't help but wonder if over the centuries we've somehow gotten this parable all wrong. Both Luke and the Gospel of Thomas tell a similar tale without all the murder and mayhem. In Luke Jesus tells it at a dinner party, at the home of a friendly Pharisee no less. In Luke it's called, "The parable of the Great Dinner."

The invited guests again don't show, but the host didn't terrorize or torture anyone, he just invited and welcomed others to fill the empty seats at the banquet hall.

Sure, it probably WAS intended as a mild rebuke of certain religious authorities of Jesus' day—the invited guests--mostly for not being on board with Jesus from the get-go.

But I always took Luke's parable to mean that God's kingdom has plenty of room, so folks don't necessarily HAVE to have a certain pedigree or special invitation; or look or act or think or worship a certain way to be welcome at the banquet. In other words, the kingdom of heaven was never meant to be an exclusive private party; it's an open house!

So I'm curious as to why Matthew would present this parable so differently. Unless maybe he was looking not so much to the future, but more to the past. If so, then to him the angry king probably was NEVER meant to be God. He was just an angry king. Jesus and his followers as well as Matthew and his first readers had known plenty of those. Like Roman Emperor Caligula who raped and enslaved many, declaring himself Lord over them. Claudius had been especially harsh on Jews. Nero on Christians.

Titus was no friend of either group, having been a general in the first Judean-Roman war. New guy Domitian made great sport of harassing Jews and Christians. Maybe the author had Herod the Great in mind. Matthew alone tells of his slaughter of the innocent infants around the time of Jesus' birth.

Historical sources say Herod also had the nasty habit of executing his own wives and his sons. But I suspect the king Matthew more likely had in mind was Emperor Vespasian. He's the one that Matthew's audience would recognize as the king who indeed slaughtered thousands of people in THEIR home city—Jerusalem, burning the city and its beloved temple to the ground in response to an unsuccessful political uprising.

After all, THAT horrifying event likely happened just a few years before Matthew's gospel was put to paper.

Scholars think Matthew's community was a group of survivors who fled the terror and persecution of Judea, relocating to a faraway city like Antioch. Throughout his gospel, Matthew constantly contrasts the kingdom of the Empire with the kingdom of God. So I really doubt he meant for us to think of God as just another ruthless emperor.

To him, if there really even IS what could be called a "king" in God's kingdom, it seems likely to me he would be more like Jesus. You know, gracious, accepting and forgiving; humble and gentle in heart. A king, who came not so much to be served, but to serve. So the way I see it, Matthew never intended for us to compare this violent king to God, but instead to contrast him with the God of peace made known in Jesus.

Who may not have had ANY role in Matthew's version of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, except maybe as the story-teller. Or perhaps as the one who went out to welcome all the regular people—the good and the bad as Matthew put it, into the peace and joy of the banquet. Or maybe Jesus was the guy without the robe. Tossed out for refusing to conform to the hatred and violence so prevalent in this world, in order to model for us the loving, peaceful ways of the next one.

If Matthew's story was in any way allegory, I'd guess WE are the "other" people. You know--the good and the bad folks welcomed in from the streets. Including tax collectors and sinners. The weak, the sick, the outcasts and the marginalized who have been terrorized enough by this world, and have been shown grace and given hope for the next world, along with the peace and steadfast love of God. Which UNLIKE this SERMON, really DO endure forever. And also wonderfully surpass all understanding.

Amen.