The Work of Staying Awake

November 8, 2026

If you're anything like me, there are few things quite as panic-inducing as having someone show up at your house unexpectedly.

You know what I mean. The doorbell rings, you look out the window, and suddenly you're taking inventory of everything that isn't quite where it belongs. There are dishes in the sink, laundry that hasn't made it into the washing machine, a pile of mail on the dining room table, and perhaps a floor that hasn't seen a mop in a week, and you have approximately thirty seconds to make your house look more like an Instagram picture and less like a crime scene.

You shove things into closets. You wipe down the kitchen counter. You spray something that smells like lemons. You turn off a few lights and hope nobody notices what's happening in the other rooms. Because sometimes it's not about actually being ready for company. It's about looking ready.

There's a bumper sticker that captures that sentiment pretty well. It reads: "Jesus is coming...look busy!"

It's funny, of course. A little irreverent. But there's something uncomfortably close to the truth in it. Because how much of our religious life is really about looking busy? How much of our time and energy goes into looking like we're doing the Lord's work, rather than actually being about the Lord's work? We can fill our calendars with church activities, learn the right language, sing the hymns, say the prayers, and show up on Sunday mornings. We can even become quite good at looking like people of faith. But are we awake? Are we paying attention? Are we tending the lamps that are supposed to illuminate the way of Christ in the world?

That's the question Jesus puts before us in this morning's Gospel. The parable of the ten bridesmaids is a strange little story. Ten women are waiting for a bridegroom to arrive so they can accompany him into a wedding celebration. Five are wise and five are foolish. All ten bring lamps. All ten fall asleep when the bridegroom is delayed. But when the announcement finally comes that he's on his way, the five wise women have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. The foolish ones don't. They scramble to find more oil, but by the time they return, the doors have been shut. The party has begun without them.

It's an unsettling ending, to say the least. Especially because the foolish bridesmaids aren't bad people. We aren't told that they're doing anything particularly wicked. They're not plotting against the bridegroom or trying to sabotage the wedding. They're simply unprepared…and perhaps that's precisely what makes this parable so challenging.

Jesus isn't talking about people who have rejected God. He's talking about people who presumably expect to be part of the celebration. People who know the bridegroom is coming. People who have lamps. People who have every intention of being there.

But good intentions aren't enough.

The question isn't whether they know the bridegroom is coming. The question is whether they've prepared themselves for his arrival. Now, we should probably pause here to remember that Jesus

isn't giving us a timetable for the end of the world. This passage comes in the middle of a larger conversation about the coming of God's reign, and Jesus is quite clear that nobody knows the day or the hour. The point isn't to spend our lives anxiously scanning the horizon, trying to figure out when Jesus might return. The point is to figure out how we're going to live in the meantime.

One of the commentators I read to prepare for today put it beautifully: Wise believers take the long look. They don't assume that the world is about to end tomorrow and therefore imagine there's no reason to worry about tomorrow's problems. They understand that faithfulness means investing in a future we may never live to see.

Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew Jesus was coming again tomorrow. His answer? He'd go out and plant an apple tree.

I love that answer, not because planting an apple tree is particularly dramatic or religious, but because it suggests that the work of faith isn't about frantic preparation for some cosmic deadline. It's about tending to the world God has entrusted to us. It's about doing the work that needs doing, even when we may never see the harvest.

That's what it means to keep our lamps burning. And I think that's also what Joshua is getting at in our first reading this morning. Joshua gathers the people of Israel together and puts a choice before them: "Choose this day whom you will serve." It's a moment of decision. The people have come through generations of wandering, hardship, and uncertainty. They've experienced God's faithfulness. They've been brought into a new land. Now Joshua asks them to decide what kind of people they're going to be.

Will they serve the gods of their ancestors? The gods of the surrounding nations? Or will they serve Yahweh, the God who brought them out of slavery and accompanied them through the wilderness? The people respond with conviction: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods." It's a wonderful declaration. But here's the thing about declarations of faith: They are only the beginning. It's one thing to say whom we will serve. It's another thing entirely to live as though we've meant what we've said.

We can proclaim our allegiance to the God of love, justice, and mercy. We can declare that we follow Jesus. We can put a rainbow flag outside our church, welcome strangers through our doors, and sing about building a world where all God's children are free. But the question remains: Are we actually doing the work?

Are we paying attention to the people who are hungry, unhoused, lonely, or afraid? Are we willing to stand alongside those who are being pushed to the margins? Are we cultivating the kind of faith that sustains us when the work gets difficult, when progress is slow, when the victories are temporary and the setbacks are real? Because building a just society is not a short-term project.

It takes generations. It takes patience. It takes persistence. It takes people willing to plant apple trees whose fruit they may never taste. There will be moments when the work feels exhilarating, when the winds seem to be at our backs and the possibilities seem endless. There will also be moments when the work feels exhausting, when the darkness seems overwhelming, and when we wonder whether anything we're doing is making a difference.

That's when we need the oil.

That's when we need the spiritual reserves that come from prayer, worship, community, generosity, and a deep commitment to the way of Jesus. Because staying awake doesn't mean we never get tired. Notice that all ten bridesmaids fall asleep! The difference isn't that five of them somehow managed to stay awake all night. The difference is that five of them had prepared for the long wait. They understood that faithfulness requires more than enthusiasm in the moment. It requires practices, commitments, and habits that sustain us over time.

And perhaps that's a useful way to think about being woke, too. The word has become something of a political football, tossed around as an insult or worn as a badge of honor. But at its heart, being awake means refusing to sleepwalk through the world. It means paying attention to the realities around us. It means recognizing injustice when we see it, noticing who is being left out, and refusing to accept cruelty as simply the way things are. Jesus calls us to stay awake. Awake to the suffering of our neighbors. Awake to the possibilities of grace. Awake to the places where love is needed and justice is waiting to be done. Awake to the fact that the kingdom of God is both already here and not yet fully realized.

We live in that in-between time. Jesus has already shown us what God's love looks like. We have already heard the good news that another world is possible. We have already been invited into the work of making that world real. But we aren't there yet. There are still hungry people to feed, strangers to welcome, prisoners to visit, wounds to heal, and systems of injustice to dismantle. There are still apple trees to plant.

So perhaps the question Jesus is asking us this morning isn't whether we will be caught doing something wrong when he arrives. Perhaps it's whether we'll be caught doing something right. Will we be tending our lamps? Will we be living the faith we've professed? Will we be so busy doing the work of love that we don't have to scramble to look busy when Jesus shows up?

Joshua said, "Choose this day whom you will serve." Not someday. Not when the circumstances are more favorable. Not when the work is easier or the outcome is guaranteed. Today. Choose the God who liberates rather than the false god who oppresses. Choose the God who welcomes rather than the false god who excludes. Choose the God who calls us to feed the hungry, shelter the unhoused, care for the vulnerable, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Choose to keep your lamp burning.

Because Jesus is coming. In the stranger at our door. In the neighbor who needs our help. In the child who deserves a better future. In the people who refuse to give up on the possibility of a more compassionate and just world.

So when the Lord comes, may we be found not merely looking busy, but actually about the work of love. May Jesus find us awake. Let’s make it so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Joshua 24:1-3a, Matthew 25:1-13
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