

Door Shut or Open

This week's texts remind us there is nothing casual about living as a witness to God's liberation and justice. It is a daily commitment, shared by each generation, with a readiness to respond, trusting the assurance this is the door to realm-of-God life?

Focus scripture: Matthew 25:1–13

Matthew 25:1–13 is directed to the early community of faith and to believers of every age who struggle with the discontinuity between the realm of God's transformational-promise and lived reality. The realm of God preached and lived by Jesus raised expectations for both personal and social transformation. Yet, when the gospel of Matthew is written some 30 to 40 years after the disciples proclaimed the resurrection of Christ, it appears to most that little, if anything, has changed. The Roman empire is still in charge. The poor continue to be exploited. Roman imperial military might has a firm grip on the populace.

What do you do when the realm of God's promise of personal and social transformation goes unfulfilled? Whether the challenge faced is that of the early Christians, a contemporary struggle with drug addiction, health insurance, immigration, climate change, or any number of personal and social issues, how does one trust, much less live into the promised transformation when nothing seems to change?

It may be half-hearted, but the early Christians to whom the gospel of Matthew is first directed still hold hope that the transformative promise of liberation, justice, and compassion is possible. The notion that those claiming to be followers of Jesus might, like the foolish maidens, be shut out of the realm of God's promise is as discomfiting to these early Christians as it for us today. Yet this is what this parable claims: "The door is shut."

The message of the women waiting is reminiscent of the Woody Guthrie song "You gotta walk that lonesome valley, You gotta walk it by yourself, Nobody here can walk it for you..." Participation in the transformative work of the realm of God only happens when we, as individuals and as communities of faith, are prepared to do the transformative work of liberation, justice, and compassion. No one else can prepare it for us. It is, for example, never enough to put a statement in one's bulletin or to pass a resolution saying

you are welcoming. Participation in the realm of God means doing the hard work in advance before a stranger or guest ever appears. It is never enough to say we support diversity, but then neglect to do the hard work demanded by racial justice.

The message to Christians of every age is that the transformative moment for realm-of-God change will come in its own time. Half-hearted or half-prepared, will never do. If we fail to do the work, we will miss the opportunity when it arrives. Expect delays, but be ready. For those who prepare, their light will shine bright, and the door to God's realm will be open.

Joshua 3:7–17 is ripe with internal tensions. On the one hand, it embraces an imperial theology of domination with a divinely sanctioned genocidal story of eliminating people who presently reside in the land. On the other hand, it calls for communities of liberation to be a faithful witness to a God whose liberation and justice are for all. Ultimately, it is up to each person and community to decide the nature of the God they choose to follow and the type of the world for which they are preparing.

Psalm 78:1–7 invites us to experience our lives and faith in relationship both to those who have gone before and those who go after. Each generation has a responsibility to share the story of liberation and justice they have received.

In **1 Thessalonians 2:9–13**, we are reminded that there is no place where hope no longer resides, including death. The promise of God's liberation, justice, and love unite us in life and death.

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There is a well-known gospel refrain that goes "they will know we are Christians by our love." An alternative refrain might read, "They will know we are witnesses by our light." This week's texts call us to be witnesses to that light and live by the hope it provides.



Focus scripture
Matthew 25:1–13

Additional scriptures
Joshua 24:1–3a, 14–25
Psalm 78:1–7
1 Thessalonians
4:13–18

 *Seasons of the Spirit* is based on semi-continuous readings of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Spirit of liberation, you have called us to be witnesses to your compassion and justice. Yet we grow impatient and discouraged because so little seems to change and our efforts feel inconsequential. Help us maintain the joy, enthusiasm and commitment required so that we might always be ready to reflect your love when the opportunity comes our way. Amen.

Lection Connection links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Children in this age group know about having to be prepared and getting ready on time, whether for a family holiday or ball game, or an exam at school. Some have probably suffered the worries of not being prepared. Some, especially those who are involved in sports or music, know the need for and the value of practice and preparation. Children are also usually ready to offer help when asked and the older children in this group often notice, on their own, when help is needed. All these experiences will give them some insight into this week's story of the parable of the ten lamps or bridesmaids.

However, since children don't always have control over how they get ready, the

focus selected as the interpretation of this parable for this age group is that the lamps with adequate oil helped the community celebrate the wedding. Some children may be puzzled that the bridesmaids with enough oil did not share with those who lacked oil. The consequence of missing the wedding feast may seem harsh to the children in your group who are very sensitive to their idea of fairness, and the need for equal distribution of everything. Wonder with the children about the challenging parts of the story, but don't feel the need to offer solutions.

Pray that each child will discover her or his own inner light and be encouraged to let it shine.

Prepare

Before the session

- Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Matthew 25:1–13, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 75).
- Set a worship space with green cloth, white pillar candle, offering basket, Bible with bookmark in focus passage, and basket of green, flat-bottomed glass stones.
- Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 3), CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- Bring, if possible, the song "Come into God's Presence" (p. 9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).
- Bring a backpack.

Engage

- Bring resource sheet "[Lamps Ready](#)."
- Rhyme group:** no additional materials needed
- Research group:** copies of resource sheet "[Weddings in Jesus' Time](#)"

Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- Serving zone:** no additional materials needed
- Outreach zone:** construction paper
- Game zone:** recording of lively music
- Community zone:** copies of resource sheet "[Bringing Light](#)"
- Craft zone:** modelling clay, tealights

Bless

- Bring, if possible, song "Live in the Spirit of Love" (p. 22 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #31 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).



Door Shut or Open

Scripture

Matthew
25:1–13

FOCUS To hear in Jesus' story of the oil lamps how we can be ready to shine with God's love

Gather

Welcome the children. Introduce any newcomers to the group and share experiences from the past week.

Opening ritual

Gather in the worship space. Point out the green cloth, reminding the group that green is the colour of the Season after Pentecost. This is a time to learn about what it means to love and follow God's ways.

Lead the group in the following litany:

Leader: We are on a journey and

God's light goes with us.

(Invite a child to light the candle.)

God's Spirit is deep inside and all around,
helping us as we learn and grow.

(Invite children to place glass stones in a spiral leading out from the candle.)

God breathes love into everything.

All: Thank you, God!

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "Come into God's Presence" (p. 9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).

Pray *(Invite children to repeat each line after you.)*

Loving God, thank you
for each person here.

May we feel you with us, as we learn
more about how to shine with your love.

Amen.

Receive the offering. Extinguish the candle to signal that the opening ritual has ended.

Connecting with the focus

Show the children the backpack and invite them to imagine they are going camping for a week. Ask:

■ What would you take with you on a camping trip?

As the children suggest items, pretend to pack.

■ How do you know what you need to take?

Encourage children to talk about what they usually do to get ready for a holiday or journey.

Engage

Preparing for the story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship area and use the bookmark to open it to the gospel of Matthew. Remind them that this book is part of four gospels that tell stories about Jesus and his teachings. Today we hear a special kind of story that Jesus used to tell. It is called a parable, and it was a story about something that didn't really happen but had a message that helped people understand how to live in God's way.

The Bible story

Use the resource sheet "[Lamps Ready](#)," based on **Matthew 25:1–13**, to tell the story.

Wondering Invite discussion on the following question:

- **What questions do you have about this story?**
- **How do you think the young women who ran out of oil felt?**
- **In this parable, what did Jesus teach about how to live in God's way?**

Exploring the story further

(To enable the children to explore the scripture reading further, according to their interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.)

Rhyme group *(for younger children)* This group will have the opportunity to review the parable through a counting rhyme. Invite children to hold up ten fingers and put one down each time a lamp goes out as you say the rhyme, calling out that number with you. Repeat together several times.

Ten young women with lamps burning fine.
One ran out of oil and then there were nine.
Nine young women waiting for a groom so late.
One ran out of oil and then there were eight.
Eight young women waiting way past eleven.
One ran out of oil and then there were seven.
Seven young women with brightly burning wicks.
One ran out of oil and then there were six.
Six young women, saying, "When will he arrive?"
One ran out of oil and then there were five.
Five young women with lamps burning bright.
Went to a wedding and shared their light.



Research group *(for older children)* This group will have the opportunity to learn more about wedding customs in biblical times. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Weddings in Jesus' Time](#)" and review it together. Then talk together about what Jesus might have wanted the disciples to learn from the parable.

Reporting Invite the rhyme group to do the rhyme together and invite the research group to share information about weddings in biblical times.

The Bible story and us

Through this parable, we can hear an invitation from Jesus to shine with God's light and love in the world. Ask:

- **Why do you think it means to shine with God's love?**
- **What are some ways we can shine God's light into the world?**

Respond

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Serving zone: Sharing light** Some of the bridesmaids kept their lamps burning and brought light to the whole community. Invite children to think of ways in which they can bring "light" to their congregation. Make a list of these ways, such as being greeters on Sunday morning, helping collect the offering during the worship service, decorating a bulletin board, leading the congregation in a song or prayer, or helping keep the church grounds clean and tidy. Have the group select one or two items from the list and prepare to do it together.
- **Outreach zone: Cards** Jesus' parable helped the disciples, and us, to be ready to keep the light of God's love shining brightly. Invite children to share that light by making cards to give to friends at church, family, relatives, and neighbours. Distribute folded pieces of construction paper and have them decorate these by drawing



a flame shape on the front of the card, with rays extending out. Encourage them to write messages of caring and encouragement inside their cards. Talk about who might receive these cards.

- **Game zone: Music game** *(for younger children)* The young women didn't stay awake but some were ready to share their light when they woke up. Children can light the way by showing God's love to others. Play a recording of lively music and have the children choose a way to move around the room, such as hopping on one leg, crawling, waddling like a duck, or marching. Then suddenly pause the music, and ask children to find a partner or group of three and exchange ideas for ways they can "shine God's love" this week. Begin the music again and have children choose a different way to move. After the game, share the ideas together as a whole group.



- ❑ **Community zone: Discussion** *(for older children)* Bringing God's light to others is an active process. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "Bringing Light." Review each scenario and discuss the questions together.
- ❑ **Craft zone: Clay symbols** The oil lamps the bridesmaids carried remind us to let God's light shine through us. Have the children look again at the illustration of a clay lamp on the resource sheet "Weddings in Jesus'



Time" and distribute modelling clay so they can make their own clay lamps. Demonstrate how to roll the dough into a ball, press with a finger to form a cavity, and pinch one end together to make a spout. Give them each a tealight to press into the cavity of their lamps. Encourage them to take their lamps home and set them where the light can be a reminder to let God's light shine through their actions.

Bless

Gather around the worship area and light the candle again.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "Live in the Spirit of Love" (p. 22 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #31 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).

Blessing Lead the group in the following litany of blessing, inviting children to repeat the last line after you:

Let's go out into the world
ready to shine with God's light.

God is with us. Amen.

Reflect

What questions or concerns did the children have about today's story? What ideas did they have for sharing God's love? How can you follow up on these ideas in the future?



LAMPS READY

based on Matthew 25:1-13

Provide the information in italics about lamps used in Jesus' time. Show the children the picture of an oil lamp on today's resource sheet "Weddings in Jesus' Day." Then pause, pick up the Bible opened to Matthew 25 before you begin the story.

In Jesus' time, light was provided by oil lamps. The oil was poured into the bowl of the lamp. A wick was made from a dried reed or other plant. It was placed into the oil so one end was at the small opening. The lamps were lit day and night in the house because the rooms were dark and then the fire was ready to light the cooking fire. Keeping oil in the lamp was the only way to keep the light. No oil, no light.

To teach the disciples and the people who came to hear Jesus, Jesus told stories about God's plan for the world. Often, Jesus told stories called parables. Parables are stories about ordinary things: a shepherd and sheep, a lost coin, a special dinner. A parable may sound ordinary, but it has a message besides the ordinary story, too. Sometimes there is more than one message. Listen for a message from this story that Jesus told:

Once upon a time, a woman and man were preparing to get married. This meant that the whole village where they lived would be part of the celebration. Ten young women were selected for a special job. They were to meet

the groom, the man who was getting married, at his house. When he arrived, they would lead the groom to the wedding hall.

Each young woman had an oil lamp. Five of the young women had their lamps full of oil and extra oil besides. But five of the young women had no extra oil. They were fine, if the groom came when they thought he would come. All the young women lit their lamps, because it was night.

However, they waited and waited. It got later and later. No groom. The young women fell asleep. Then someone shouted that the groom was on the way. The five young women with no extra oil looked at their lamps. They were almost out of oil. They did not have enough to go with the groom. The other five took turns putting out their lamps and carefully pouring more oil in them. Then they lit their lamps again. Now they had no extra oil.

"Give us some oil," the other young women said.

"Sorry, there's no time now. The groom is almost here."

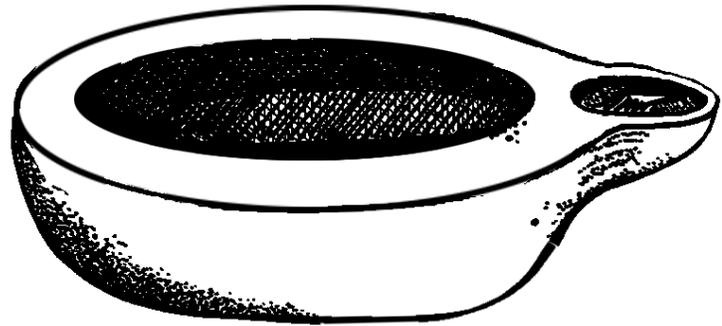
So the five young women whose lamps had no oil rushed off to find more. While they were gone, the groom came. The five young women with oil in their lamps lit the way for the groom to go to the wedding. The five young women whose lamps were out of oil missed the whole party.

The disciples were puzzled about the meaning of Jesus' story. But perhaps they imagined the lights of the oil lamps shining with God's love.

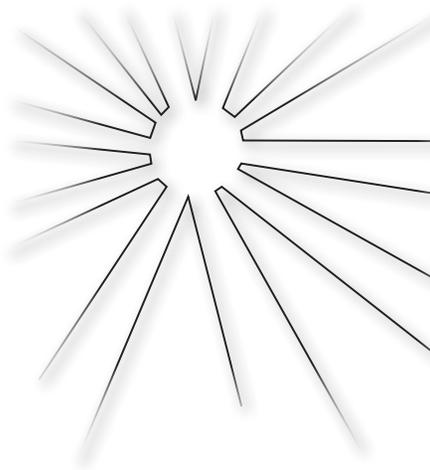


Weddings in Jesus' Time

When Jesus lived in Palestine, weddings were different than they are today. Instead of everyone gathering at a building like a church, all the unmarried girls in the village went to the groom's house. They waited there while the groom went to get the bride from her parents' house. Then the girls would help light the way of the bride and groom as they came back to the groom's home. The lamps they carried would also light the wedding hall. When the groom brought the bride back, a party began that lasted for days.



The girls needed lamps or torches to light their way. The lamps were probably like the ones shown here, small clay lamps filled with oil and a floating wick. Since there was no electricity or batteries, the girls had to have enough oil for their lamps so they did not run out before the groom returned with the bride. Imagine how beautiful that procession must have been with all those lamps flickering in the darkness.



Bringing Light

Paul has discovered that a park near his house is filled with litter. There are only a few litter containers, and they are usually full. Paul is ten years old. He goes to a large school. What can he do to bring God's light to this situation? With whom can Paul work on this problem?

As Stacey walked to school yesterday, she overheard some older children talking about ways to vandalize the school building. Stacey is 11 years old. What can she do to bring God's light to this situation? With whom can she work?

Kym heard that the local animal shelter was filled with abandoned pets. He already has two pets at home, and he knows his parents won't agree to any more. Kym is nine years old. How can he bring God's light to this problem? With whom can he work?

Verney's mother told him that his Aunt Maria is very sick. She has two children who are teenagers. Verney is sad about his aunt. He wonders how he can help his cousins. Verney is ten years old. What can he do to bring God's light to this family situation? With whom can he work?

Christie read a book about ecology and learned that planting trees and smaller plants can improve the air quality. She likes to take care of plants, but she has no money to buy any. How can Christie bring God's light to this situation? With whom can she work?