

“Incline Your Hearts”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 12, 2023 - Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Prop. 27
[Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13](#)

Once upon a time, long ago, just after I graduated from college in Kansas and was and living just west of Denver, Colorado, some dear friends that I knew from college came to visit. These good friends drove up to Colorado from the flatlands of east Texas and had never before been to the Centennial State or seen its majestic mountains, so I recommended that we spend a day during their visit going up into the mountains to take in some of the breathtakingly beautiful vistas. As my visitors came from close to sea level and their bodies needed some time to adjust to being in the much higher elevation, we held off on going up into the mountains for a couple of days, seeing the sights in and around the Mile High City of Denver while they acclimated. But once their bodies had adjusted enough to avoid getting altitude sickness from going much higher in elevation, we headed west, up into the mountains.

One of my favorite mountain spots to take visitors when I lived out in Colorado was Mount Evans, now called Mount Blue Sky, which, though being only 35 miles west of Denver as the bird flies, is 9,000 feet higher in elevation, with its summit poking through the clouds at 14,271 feet. This high point is an ideal spot to take visitors, not only because of how accessible it is to the Denver area, but because there is a paved roadway that is open during the summer months that goes to the very top (or almost to the top -- you still have to climb the last 100 feet or so if you want to make it up to the actual summit), and because the views in all directions from the heights of Mount Blue Sky are absolutely spectacular.

So after my visiting flatlander friends spent some time adjusting to the higher elevation of Denver, we headed west for a drive into the mountains and up to the top of Mount Blue Sky, with one of my friends driving his Texan car while I served as navigator and tour guide. We drove up and up along the scenic byway and then pulled over mid-way to the top to enjoy a picnic lunch at 10,000-foot-high Echo Lake. After eating and taking in the tranquil sights of the lake, we decided to continue our journey to the top of Mount Blue Sky.

But we ran into a problem. My friend's car, which made it all the way from the plains of Texas to the Colorado mountains, decided that it was content to stay right there, at the serene shore of Echo Lake. After trying for a while, unsuccessfully, to get the car to start, we discovered the source of our problem: The car's gas gauge indicated that, as we drove up to the mountain and had been busy taking in all of the amazing sights on our way, we had failed to notice that the car was running out of fuel, which it did, right there at Echo Lake.

This was not a good situation. While Echo Lake is beautiful and a great spot to enjoy a picnic, it is many miles from any town or gas station, and it is not a good place to run out of gas. Fortunately, in those pre-cell phone days, a kind soul who was also at the lake, who drove a Jeep with extra gas cans strapped to the back of it, offered us a couple of gallons of fuel so that we could start the car and then drive back down the mountain, which we did, hanging our heads in shame, to fill up. And then, as it was getting dark, we went back home for the night.

My friends left the next morning, returning to Texas without having seen the spectacular sights from the mountaintop, all because we were not properly prepared for the journey. Yes, we had carefully planned on avoiding altitude sickness, and we had carefully chosen our idyllic destination and mapped out our route to get there, but we had overlooked a basic necessity of any road trip by carelessly failing to have enough fuel for the journey.

We wouldn't be the first people to fail on our journey by being foolishly unprepared for it. History is full of examples of people failing because they were not prepared, and teachers throughout the ages have told stories to help people recognize the importance of planning ahead. We heard one such story this morning in our gospel lesson about the wise and foolish young women. In Jesus' parable, there are ten young maidens serving as "bridesmaids," whose job, according to the wedding customs of Jesus' time and place, was to accompany the groom, usually from his family's home, lighting the way with lamps for his journey to where the bride was, usually at her family's home, and then lighting the way and celebrating as the couple returned to the groom's home together for several days' worth of joyous wedding festivities. Some of the bridesmaids showed up ready to do their job, having enough oil in their lamps and plenty extra to light the way for the groom and then the happy couple as they went on their

journey. Some of the bridesmaids, however, did not come prepared for their job, and so when the groom showed up late (which, I can tell you from officiating many marriages over the years, happens...often), they didn't have enough oil left in their lamps to do their *one job* of lighting the way for the journey. This was an epic fail, like my friends' and my failed attempt to drive to the mountain summit, because they were unprepared.

The parable about an epic failure to be prepared is set in the gospel of Matthew, which was written a few decades after Jesus taught, and is part of a section of the gospel known as "The Little Apocalypse," which uses parables and other symbolic language to present the perspective of the gospel-writers' community concerning the final days of people on earth. As many followers of Jesus expected him, after his death and resurrection, to return to the earth from the sky any day, there was a growing sense of disappointment and disbelief among those Jesus-followers for whom the gospel was written as the days of waiting for Christ to return turned into months of waiting, which turned into years and then decades of waiting. The gospel's message was for them to not give up hope, for while Jesus the bridegroom may be delayed in returning for the wedding celebration to begin, those who have been given the job of keeping their lamps trimmed and burning, prepared with enough fuel for the full journey and any unforeseen delays they might experience before or during the joyous procession, are called to be ready to shine and light the way.

This is our calling as we await the full appearance of Christ's realm on earth. Whenever the day may come when all is made good as Christ reigns among us, we are to be ready by shining and having enough fuel to keep our lamps going. And how do we prepare? What do we do to fuel up?

One thing we do to prepare is to embrace our job as God's light shiners. Just as we heard in our first scripture lesson that the Israelites were to turn away from the gods of their neighbors and whatever idols pulled their gaze away from their God, and they were to incline their hearts to God alone, we are called to incline our hearts to God alone, leaning away from all that draws our attention away from God and leaning into our identity as a people of God, who are called to embrace God's light and share God's light with others. So lean into it; claim and hold on to your job as a bearer of God's light.

Another thing we can do to shine now and beyond now is to continue to gather, as we are doing here today, to worship together, to learn together, to grow together, to encourage one another together, to support each other together, to seek justice together, to and serve our community together. Sharing life together in this community of faith will provide us fuel to keep our fire lit and shining, no matter the darkness of the world around us or the difficulties we may face on our path through it. And, of course, your own spiritual practices and disciplines will fuel your fire as well.

So do your work of being ready, and let's work together to keep the light burning. May God fuel us all this morning and keep us full and ready to shine on the journey ahead. Amen.