

Sermon – November 27, 2022
“Swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Happy New Year! Thanks to everyone who braved the elements and came out this morning for sunrise on the first day of the new year, the start of another cycle through the events of the Christian calendar. And thanks to everyone who helped with breakfast. Welcome to Advent, the season when we look forward to the coming of the Christ child and the final return of Jesus in power. We will spend two weeks looking forward to the return of Jesus in power, and then we will spend the last weeks focused on the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, which we celebrate on Christmas. By contrast, the return of Jesus in power is a day we look for each day of our lives, knowing that with each passing day, Jesus' return draws nearer.

It seems fitting as we begin Advent to look at some of the prophecies spoken about Jesus' return. Let me read from Isaiah 2:1-5: "The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!"¹ This is a rich passage that speaks to a future time when the temple mount will be the primary source of instruction for many peoples. Out of Zion shall go forth instruction which occurred with Jesus' arrival as the Word made flesh. For Israel, this prophecy held a near term promise for the return of Israel from exile to the Promised Land. For us today, we look back to the birth of Jesus and find the Word of God made flesh, and instruction that goes out to all of the world comes from Jerusalem. And finally, we find a coming judge between the nations and many peoples. In response to the arrival of this judge, the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Peace will come to the nations and they will no longer learn war. With all the conflicts in our world, we hunger for such a time, for the coming of this judge who will bring peace and an end to all conflicts between nations and people.

When I read this passage, it reminds me of a world-wide program started in 1957 called Project Plowshare. The objective was to find peaceful uses of atomic power, a fitting objective at that time, given the recent use of that power in war and the unimaginable death and destruction its use brought into the world. I became aware of this program while working at a place called the Nevada Test Site, located 87 miles north of Las Vegas, where the U.S. conducted open air tests of atomic bombs. I was directed to a plowshare test site that was the U.S. program to dig a new Panama Canal by using a nuclear bomb to move the soil. I was told to walk out on the observation platform and see if I could throw a rock across the crater. Several of us drove to the site one afternoon after work and found the platform. It extended 30 yards out into a giant crater in the earth that had caution signs all around it warning of radioactive exposure if you strayed off the platform. I walked out and looked at the size of the crater and decided that I might be able to throw a stone across. I found one and gave it my best try. In spite of my best throw, my stone did not sail across the crater but looked as if it was tossed straight down. You see, the size of the crater was so large that our minds could not grasp it, but when you threw your rock, you suddenly got perspective. It was a very large hole in the ground. The one atomic bomb had

successfully moved 12 million tons of earth. It seemed like a great success for making bombs into plowshares until someone pointed out that a canal dug in this manner could not be used for thousands of years due to the radiation levels, and so this program was abandoned. If you Google “Project Plowshare,” you will find a picture of the crater. We have a lot to learn about beating our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. We look forward to the day when the people of the nations will learn war no more, a day that will come when the judge between the nations comes.

As we turn to our text this morning, let me provide some information for context. This short section from Matthew is part of Jesus’ long response to a question he was asked by the disciples in response to a comment he made about a time when not one of the stones of the temple would be left on top of another. The question they asked was “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus’ answer has two major parts. The first is the destruction of Jerusalem, which Rome accomplished in 66 AD. The second part of Jesus’ answer is about his return in power which we heard read in part this morning.

There are many things that we might notice from this morning’s scripture. First is that Jesus knows that he will return and the circumstances associated with the arrival of the last day. He also speaks to the presence of angels in the Father’s kingdom, so we should have no doubts as to their presence with us. More difficult for us is the idea that neither Jesus nor the angels know the day and the hour of the last day; only the Father knows the time. Jesus’ acknowledgement that he does not know the time and that only the Father knows the time places us into a bit of a theological bind as we also know that Jesus and the Father are one, coequal for all time. How then can Jesus not know this detail when he knows that the event will occur? There are many explanations for Jesus’ lack of knowledge about the time of his return, but for us this morning, we should understand that the Father’s will is not for Jesus to share the date and time of his return, but to give us guidance for how to live until he does return. Those who spend time and effort seeking to understand that which the Father has not willed for Jesus to share miss the importance that Jesus has a great deal to share with us about how we are to live our lives in the inbreaking kingdom of God until he does return. Simply put, we are to be those who are ready each day of our lives for Jesus’ return. We are to be living in a manner that looks to the arrival of this day and until it does arrive, we are to be those who are at work with Jesus in his

mission to all people. The question for us from this text is “Are we ready?” Jesus immediately begins to give us guidance about what readiness looks like in the life of a Christ follower.

First, Jesus uses the example of Noah and his family to clarify our waiting experience. Remember Noah. He built the ark over 400 years of working to be ready for a flood in a land where it had never rained. One point we should realize is that since Jesus uses this example to help instruct us, Jesus is aware of Noah and his situation. Jesus knows how the people of Noah’s time lived and what the outcome of their life focus was: death in the flood. Jesus tells the disciples that just like the people of Noah’s day, who, though warned of the coming flood, continued to live as they wanted and did not heed God’s message given through Noah, continued to drink and marry and live life as if it would always continue as it had. All of their plans ended on the day the flood came and they were swept away. They had made no preparations, they were not ready, and only Noah and his family were saved.

Noah, unlike his contemporaries, was prepared. He had listened to the guidance of God and had worked to be ready for the arrival of the flood. Those who did not listen were judged and swept away in the flood. Jesus’ guidance to his disciples, and to us, is that the last day will come suddenly and we are to be prepared for its arrival. If we will take time to read the rest of this chapter and part of the next chapter of Matthew, we will find that Jesus follows his answer to the disciples’ question about the coming of judgment to the earth with four parables, each of which elaborates a different aspect of readiness. We might recall these four parables. The first is the comparison of two slaves, one whom the master finds at work on his return and the other, who decides his master will not be back anytime soon, who beats the fellow slaves he has charge over and eats and drinks with drunkards. When the master returns, he blesses the slave who is at work but judges the one who is not found working to bring about his master’s will. Next is the parable of the ten bridesmaids, some of whom are prepared with extra oil and some who are not. Those who are prepared are welcomed into the wedding celebration and those who are not prepared are locked out of the celebration. Then comes the parable of the talents, where those who put the gifts of their master to work growing the master’s kingdom are rewarded richly, but the one who does not use his gift is stripped of his talent and thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And finally, we have the talent of the return of the king, where those who have worked to meet the needs of the least of those in the kingdom of God are rewarded and those who have not are sent away from the king’s presence into the eternal fire.

While these parables that Jesus shares about the attributes of those in the kingdom of God are rich with guidance, let me highlight four aspects of being prepared, one aspect from each parable: responsibility, readiness, productivity, and accountability.ⁱⁱ The first parable teaches that those who are prepared to be in the kingdom of God live in a responsible manner. That responsibility is to put the work of King Jesus first and foremost in our lives and to responsibly use all of the gifts or talents that God has placed in our hands in a responsible manner. In the parable, Jesus speaks to the slave giving the other slaves he has charge of their food. They are cared for and provided for as his duties require. He demonstrates responsibility to do what he has been charged to carry out even in the absence of his master. Even though Jesus has not returned, this is to be our approach as citizens of the kingdom towards those we have charge of in this life. A quote that may help us with living responsibly is to “Live each day so that [we] will be neither afraid of tomorrow nor ashamed of yesterday.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The next parable, the ten bridesmaids, speaks to living in the kingdom as those who are ready for the return of the Lord. The bridesmaids who had prepared for a full night of watchfulness were ready as they had thought to bring along extra oil to allow their lamps to shine throughout the night if needed. We are to be those who are also living in a state of watchful preparation for Jesus’ return and have only right relationships with our family, friends, neighbors, and the strangers God places in our paths. We can recognize a state of readiness “when our relationships with God and others are what they should be.”^{iv}

The third aspect of life in the kingdom we are to find in its citizens is productivity. In the parable of the talents, we find demonstrated this idea of taking what we have been given, small or large, and seeking to be intentionally productive for the kingdom of God. Jesus reminds us we are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, and might. All that we have in our hand, both the natural gifts or talents we were born with and those gifts given to us by Holy Spirit, are to be fully employed in a purposeful manner for the work of the kingdom of God. In this third parable, we also find one of the pitfalls that citizens and non-citizens of the kingdom struggle with and that is a faulty understanding of God’s nature. In the parable, the lazy slave accuses his Lord of being a harsh man, taking what is not his, and claiming he was afraid of his master. The warning here is for us to work to have an accurate view of God and not one that we have developed out of our own thoughts as to how we desire God to be. We will often find this in those outside the kingdom of God who avoid coming to belief in Jesus because they cannot

accept that a good God can allow suffering. They lack a biblically founded understanding of the steadfast love of God, a love that is extended to us while we are yet sinners as seen in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. We know we are loved because even while we were sinners, Jesus died for us. Seek to be those who are deep in the Word of God and are learning with others what God's Word holds and teaches about the nature of God.^v

The final aspect of citizenship is accountability. This is found in the last of the parables as the righteous judge separates the sheep and the goats based on their treatment of the least of these in the family of God, setting the sheep, those who are part of Jesus' kingdom, at his right hand, but sending the goats at his left hand off to "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"^{vi} for their failure to care for the least of those in the family of God. On the last day, we will all be held accountable for how we have lived our lives and used the opportunities to care for others in the family of God and outside of God's family. We will face an accounting before a righteous judge who knows our hearts for how we have lived as we await the return of Jesus in power.

Jesus' return will come upon all who live on the face of the earth. There will not be a long time of warnings that precede his coming in power. There will be no time for us to repent or to make right some difficult relationship that we have left till a later day. Like the thief in the night, we will be unaware of his coming until we awake and find he is here. All of these parables speak to the suddenness of Jesus' return. We are to be those who are prepared, living each day of our lives as if Jesus' return in power will be this day, and yet planning for tomorrow's labor as if Jesus' return will be delayed for hundreds of years. We are to be found prepared no matter the hour of Jesus' return. We are to be those who are living responsibly, in a state of readiness for Jesus' return, yet being productive with all that is in our hand for all of the days of our life and ready for giving a good account of our labor of love to our Lord. Let us endeavor to live as Jesus has asked us each day that we might be a people ready for his return and known as those at work in his mission to all people through the love we share with those who are seeking to enter the kingdom of God in this place.

Pray with me: Jesus, we thank you for another year to journey with you and to be at work in this place in your mission to all people. Help us to live as those guided by Holy Spirit into lives that are prepared for the sudden return of our King. Teach us with your word, guide us with

your Spirit, and bring us into new and continued times of productivity for the work you have for us in your ripe harvest. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 1580). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (pp. 814-815). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 817). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 818). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^v Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 820). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3021). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.