

I never realized how important it was to think ahead—to be prepared—until I went through my first snowstorm as a Maine homeowner a couple of years ago. That’s when I woke to discover the power out, and thought: “Outside these covers, it’s going to be cold.” Sticking a foot out from under my warm blankets confirmed that hunch.

So I JUMPED (yes, actually JUMPED) into my robe and slippers, and went out to the kitchen and turned on the tap to fill up a cup with water for hot tea. Do you know what happened?? Nothing came out!

What? Oh no. NO WATER.

Because: well. I’d never had a well before, only city water. Imagine my surprise when I realized that without electricity—the well doesn’t work. I’m not sure how I thought the water got into the sink without electricity—but really—think about it: how does city water get into the sink without electricity?

Some of you probably know the answer to that question, don’t you? Well, I didn’t. Still don’t if I’m honest.

But this last Monday when we had what sounded like a hurricane from a horror movie soundtrack roaring around our house—you can bet I filled up every water jug and pail I owned. I was going to be ready, this time.

And the ironic thing: whenever I’m ready for the worst: it never happens. Have you noticed that?

The Gospel reading this morning also seems to talk about being prepared. It’s a good habit to cultivate. *Be prepared* is even the motto of the Boy Scouts. I think all of us appreciate how it’s good to be ready for anything.

*Jesus said, “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’”*

We have hard-core Jesus here again. Sometimes hard-core Jesus makes me want to put a few hard questions to him. Like--- “Aren’t we supposed to share and share alike—after all, Jesus, wasn’t it you who said, “If someone is without a cloak and you have two—give them one of yours.” Wouldn’t that seem to apply here, too, Jesus?” He just looks at me.

That doesn’t seem to be Jesus’ message here. What IS Jesus’ message?

Well—this story about the *kingdom of heaven* is obviously a metaphor. Metaphors: a figure of speech in which one thing is regarded as symbolic of something else. Here’s a metaphor which will sound very familiar: “I am the good shepherd, ... and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Obviously, Jesus is not really a shepherd. He doesn't sit on lonely hills and guard sheep. And we are not really sheep, (*one hopes...*) living in fields and getting sheared once a year. Metaphors are symbols. In Jesus' time they were considered one of the most elevated forms of speech.

But what does the oil symbolize? Let's try this: the oil is a metaphor for faith.

Ah ha! But what is faith? Jesus and his listeners would have understood the Jewish understanding of faith. To them-- and to Jesus-- faith must have 3 parts: the capacity to trust in God, the courage to act on that trust, with the expectation that God will meet us in our actions. To a good Jew- like Jesus- *action* was the integral part of faith.

Faith wasn't a belief in something, esoterically, in one's head: it was how we *acted* in response to what we believed. What we trusted as truth.

Jesus knows that we build up our faith by practicing-- *acting out* our trust in God. He might even say, "If people can't see our faith by how we act towards others, how will people know we have faith at all?" And he would have a point.

So. The bridesmaids were carrying their faith with them. Most of us know that faith isn't magical, it's not something that zots us out of the blue—like a religious thunderbolt. No. It's something we must replenish regularly, or it will run out. It's kind of like being on an airplane when the air masks deploy: first we need to replenish our own faith before we can help others.

It could be that the 5 foolish bridesmaids are more interested in the end game—the wedding feast-- than in making deposits into their faith bank.

Perhaps the foolish 5 see their faith as something they either have or don't have, and the 5 see it as something they keep topped up so they can act quickly.

Maybe the wise bridesmaids weren't being selfish or unkind. What the foolish 5 wanted was impossible. Maybe the oil—maybe our faith—CAN'T be scooped out and shared with someone else.

While we *may* be able to share our beliefs—our thoughts-- with others, it's hard to share our actions with others.

Can we sleep for someone else? Eat for them? Breathe for them? While we can act on behalf of someone else, we can't act out someone else's faith. We can't live someone else's faith for them. And It's up to each of us to act out our own faith, and replenish from God's store when it gets low.

Because when the Bridegroom arrives, we need to be ready to get up and go.

Let's think of it another way: how do we know a firefighter? They rush to put out fires. How do we know a cook: they make bread, or pastry, or cake. How do we know a doctor? They save help the sick and save lives. And how do we know a Christian? They always act with love towards everyone they meet. Don't we?

After all: if our beliefs aren't reflected in our actions, then how will God know us?

Amen.