

Sermon Series:  
**Street Signs and Billboards**

Sunday, November 8, 2020

#1 “Informed Hope” based on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-19 and Matthew 25:1-13

There’s a road not far from here which leads to a small-town cemetery. The cemetery is tucked into a corner of land that is hard to see from the highway, down a small street of potholes and broken pavement. The road ends at the cemetery gates. As you turn from the main road to head toward the cemetery there are two road signs nearly side by side. One sign reads, “cemetery ahead.” It is followed quickly by another sign that reads, almost sarcastically, “Dead End.”

Some signs do nothing more than point out the obvious.

For the next couple of weeks, we are going to be exploring the way three of Jesus’ parables in Matthew function as a series of road signs and billboards for people of faith. Jesus’ stories served many of the same purposes that road signs and billboards serve: they guided the disciples in discovering the way of life God intended for them. They are remembered by us, says Amy Jill Levine because they continue to provoke, challenge and inspire – they are our guides in the paths of becoming a follower of Jesus.

These stories were told to people who were anxious and worried. They pointed the way forward to people who were worried that Jesus was gone – and were signs of hope to those who wondered why he was so long in returning. They are billboards advertising the way of Jesus in a world filled with all sorts of pain, and they continue to show us the way forward today. Each of these stories is a snapshot of what it means to wait for God’s kingdom—and what it means to live as people of hope in anxious times.

By all accounts, levels of anxiety are skyrocketing. A poll conducted by the American Psychiatric Association this summer revealed what many of us may have already been feeling in our guts:

- Nearly half of all Americans were anxious about the possibility of getting coronavirus;
- Nearly four in ten are anxious about becoming seriously ill;
- Even more – about 62% -- are worried about their loved ones becoming sick.
- About a third of Americans believe that coronavirus has had a negative impact on their mental health. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/new-poll-covid-19-impacting-mental-well-being-americans-feeling-anxious-especially-for-loved-ones-older-adults-are-less-anxious>

Not included in this poll were other factors like the election, the economy, or signs of social unrest. These have also shaped our feelings of worry. As one of my friends quipped this week, the election as causing so much stress eating that she was pretty certain she would reach 270 before either of the candidates!

Anxiety is in the air that we breathe. Anxiety fills the air of the wedding Matthew describes: like any wedding, there is excitement mixed with fear and worry and concern that the groom has been delayed.

And when anxiety becomes chronic, it constrains our ability to learn and creates a sense of imaginative gridlock. Anxiety holds us captive by playing on our fears.

In his book on anxiety in churches, Peter Steinke reminds us that while news stories about shark attacks in the ocean quickly raises our fears about going to the beach, the odds are about 95 million to one that a shark will actually attack you. Meanwhile, the odds of drowning in the ocean about 225,000 to one – but no one warns us against going to the ocean.

Well, some do. But that's another sermon.

Jesus' parables are road signs warning us of the obstacles of anxiety and worry. I will be honest and tell you that not everything in these stories will make sense. The story he tells about the wedding moves quickly from the excitement of welcoming the groom to tragedy. Five bridesmaids were wise, and five were foolish. When the bridegroom is delayed, they all grow tired of waiting. But when the shout goes out – here he comes! – the tragedy becomes apparent: only five of the women had thought ahead to bring enough oil to keep their lamps burning.

The others are sent off in a futile search for more oil. Where can you find an oil store open at that time of night? It's ridiculous, ludicrous. The wise brought along enough for their own lamps, but that will not be enough for others. Anxiety begins to set in: how do you play catch up when you're unprepared?

Weddings are all about being prepared. In one of my first weddings in ministry, the wedding took place in a cow pasture on a Colorado ranch. In my inexperience, I did not tell the bride and groom that no matter how cute a ringbearer may look for photographs, it is never a good idea to give a four year old little boy the actual rings. For hours before the service, the toddler ran across the pasture at breakneck speed carrying his ring pillow, with the wedding rings not very well attached. When it came time to exchange rings, the little boy looked down at his empty pillow and shrugged. The service was interrupted for several minutes as the mother of the bride got down on her hands and knees in a formal and started crawling across the cow pasture. Meanwhile clouds for the afternoon thunderstorm began to form.

The ring was found, by the way, and the wedding was over before the rain started. And I learned to remind couples not to trust their rings to a four year old or to anyone acting like a four year old.

The scenario invokes the sort of anxiety hovering over the parable: the storms of the world are forming, the people of God are scurrying around. The task of the bridesmaid's was to light the pathway for the groom—but only five were wise.

Instead of rebuking the foolish, I think the parable celebrates the wise women who, as Tom Long says, “who hold on to the faith deep into the night, who even though they see no bridegroom coming still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God.”

This is what the church is called to do in a time of anxiety and hopelessness. We do not have time to head off on a midnight shopping trip to find more oil. Instead, we use what we have cultivated over time, the faith we have discovered, the good works we have been doing, the love we have generated. If we take this parable seriously, it becomes a signpost on how the church is to live: with hope, with confidence, even in the long delays of faith which are sure to come.

This is far more than a story about wedding etiquette. Rather, it is a story about the being prepared. Jesus tells the story to remind the disciples that they are to live in a state of readiness. Not a state of anxious worry. They are not to be the ones who are caught by surprise but rather the ones who realize that the kingdom may be delayed. Things may get difficult.

Staying ready is not easy. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul knows that many have questions about the toll that grief has taken on their community. They are grieving, worried about what has happened to their loved ones. Paul's words are another signpost of faith: we do not grieve as those who do not have hope. Encourage each other with these promises, says Paul.

It's a bright yellow warning sign: Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

In December, 1914, the British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton set forth on an expedition to explore Antarctica. He was leading his team on the first overland crossing of that continent, and set sail on a ship appropriately named *Endurance*. Shackleton led 28 men into unbelievable situations for more than 634 days. They ran out of food. They suffered brutal temperatures. Half way into the expedition, the *Endurance* was crushed between floes of ice. The ship's captain wrote in his diary: “We had lost our home in that universe of ice. We had been cast out into a whole wilderness that might indeed prove to be our tomb.”

Nothing prepared Shackleton's expedition for that moment, except, perhaps, for Ernest Shackleton's quiet perseverance. In that moment of desolation, he led with clarity and calmness—and the team survived.

Jesus tells us – in times of struggle, when the pandemic sweeps over us, when we face the uncertainty, become the wise women who understood hope sees beyond dead ends. Amen.