

Yr. A, Proper 27
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Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
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Lessons: Amos 5:18-24
Psalm 70
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

So, one thing seemed pretty clear on Wednesday afternoon...when it was past time for me to finish writing this sermon for our weekly recording. We, the people, seemed remarkably, evenly divided...on the question of who should be the next President. I had written almost an entire sermon on Tuesday about the powerful and challenging lesson from the prophet, Amos. It's one of my favorite images in the entire Old Testament—a vision of justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

You might have liked that sermon, but I felt like it needed to wait for another time. Instead, I believe we need to reflect more thoroughly on the Gospel lesson. It's the *pastoral* thing to do. And for reasons that will become more obvious in a few moments, I believe it is also the *prophetic* thing to do.

So many things seem challenging to us right now...tense...uncertain...frustrating...scary. This might sound a little bit cruel to say, but I need to say it because it's true. It could be a lot worse. It *has been* a lot worse. Just look for a moment at the life and death of Jesus Christ, our one true Lord and Governor. When he walked the roads of Judah and Galilee, it was *also* a time of division. I don't know if it was as evenly divided, but it was divided, *for sure*.

Remember what Jesus said back in chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel? "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

Even more significant than the division within those Jewish families was the division between the regular people and those political and religious leaders who lorded it over them. *As we well know*, the division between kings and emperors, and the subjects they oppress—that is a division which has deadly consequences...just as it did for Jesus, hanging on a cross for speaking the truth to power. Thank God we get to live in a democracy. It's not perfect, by any means; but it beats the alternative every time.

Now, fast forward with me about thirty or forty years, and we find St. Matthew, trying to write all these stories down so people can know about the life, the teachings, the ways of Jesus—life-saving ways; life-giving teachings; a life-transforming example of truth, justice, and righteousness for all the world to see, and follow!

Matthew was challenged to live in an even worse time, I think. It was about the time of the 1st Jewish Roman War. Now, that was not a fair fight. Rome's military was enormously powerful. On the other hand, the Jewish people were enormously *loyal*—to one another, to their nation, and to their God. They would never have stood up as well as they did to resist the oppression of Rome had they not been miraculously loyal—faithful to the end. But in the end, the Roman Empire was just too much. They crushed Jerusalem. They crushed the Temple. They stole everything.

We cannot fathom the disillusionment that our Jewish forbears experienced between 66 and 73 A.D. while Matthew was probably organizing all this material...all these stories...into a straightforward Gospel that people would be able to hear and understand forever and ever. It helps me to think about how much worse Jesus had it. It helps me to think about how much harder St. Matthew had it.

It helps me to tell *myself* what I used to tell my girls when they were much younger, and when life seemed hard: "You're gonna' have to buck up!" When challenges begin to mount and things get tense, uncertain, frustrating, or scary, it's time to 'buck up.'

Now, a funny thing happened when our oldest daughter, Katherine, was about six years old, and crying uncontrollably about something. She eventually calmed down a little, paused, sniffed once or twice, and looked up at me with those big innocent eyes and said, “Daddy, I know I have to ‘buck in.’”

It took everything I had not to laugh. Katherine had the right *idea*, but the wrong *preposition*. The exhortation is supposed to be: ‘buck *up*’ not ‘buck *in*.’

I shook my head, knowingly, and said, “I know you can do it!” Just like that, Katherine had given Kim and me a whole new tool in our arsenal when things were not just challenging, but also tense, uncertain, frustrating or scary. From that day forward, when things got not just tough, but *really tough*, we started saying, “You’re gonna’ have to buck up...and buck in!” That is what you say to people you love and care about.

Well, this reminds me of another story I once heard. Once upon a time, there were ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. They were remarkably, evenly divided—five of them were foolish, and five of them were wise. Five of them took no oil; five of them took enough oil.

Well, things didn’t turn out the way any of them planned. The bridegroom was delayed. So, they all lay down and took a nap. Suddenly, there it was. The moment they all had waited for. Unfortunately, it was not the moment they all had *prepared for*. It was past time for those five foolish bridesmaids to ‘buck up and buck in.’ Remember, Jesus said this to people he loved and cared about.

Some of you might be trying to figure out who I am describing as wise and foolish as it relates to voting. That is not what I am talking about. I’m talking about what you *are doing* or *might be willing to do* in order to spiritually prepare for the living of these difficult, divisive, tense, uncertain, frustrating, fearful days.

How will you fortify your prayer life, right now? How will you strengthen your understanding and appreciation of the true, just, and righteous ways of Jesus Christ, right now? How will you develop and express your fidelity...your **loyalty**...your **love** for God, for your Church, for your neighbor, and for your nation?

Sometimes when I need a little inspiration, I think about my father who served in the Army during World War II. He wanted desperately to become a pilot, and when he was 18 years old and a little too naïve, he took the recruiter’s word. “Young man, we’ll have you flying in no time.”

My dad completed boot camp and was ready to get his assignment to flight school, when his commanding officer gave him *not one*, but three choices! “Mechanic school. Mechanic school. Mechanic school.” My dad had to buck up and buck in. And that officer’s decision probably saved my father’s young life because he was deployed in, but not flying over, the battlefields in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and Germany.

On the Sunday closest to Veteran’s Day, I like to include the prayer for heroic service to our nation during the prayers of the people. I like to think about all the people who have bucked up and bucked in under difficult, dangerous, and sometimes life-threatening situations. And they *did it*—not for themselves, but for *their nation*...for people they *didn’t even know*...for people they didn’t even *agree with* about politics.

Those who have served heroically are an example of loyalty. It is the kind of fidelity that our elected leaders need to imitate. It is the kind of faith that our citizenry needs to imitate. Living in a democracy, even an imperfect democracy, is still a gift to be treasured and treated with respect and dignity.

In today’s lessons, Amos sounds really harsh, but only to the hypocrites. To the Israelites who *did what was right* and who *said what was true* and who *showed loyalty to their neighbors*; Amos described one of the most beautiful images in the Old Testament—“Justice, rolling down like (mighty) waters, and righteousness (cleansing and refreshing the nation) like an ever-flowing stream.”

In today's lessons, Jesus also sounds really harsh, but only to those who aren't really serious about meeting him and following him. To faithful Christians who fortify themselves to persevere in times of challenge, uncertainty, and fear; this parable is nothing more than a *helpful reminder* that there *is a time* to 'buck up and buck in,' and that time is not tomorrow or next week or next year...that time is now!

I sat down with a couple the other day who has a tough row to hoe right now. There are some things we might not agree upon. Other things we *do* agree upon. I'll tell you this. They have filled their lamps with oil—spiritually speaking. They are fortified for the challenge that comes when things get really tough. They have developed fidelity and loyalty. They are ready for the unexpected. They will have light in the darkness, because of their choices.

Dear people of God, the world is divided. The nation is divided. Even the Church is divided. *Not how you think it is*. It is divided—maybe not evenly—but it is divided between those who faithfully prepare for the day of challenge, and those who don't. It is divided between those who are resolved to be loyally committed to the truth, to justice, and to righteousness like Jesus is, and those who aren't.

For goodness' sake, choose to equip yourselves with the life-saving ways of Jesus. Fortify yourselves with the life-giving teachings of Jesus. Develop within yourselves the life-transforming example of truth, justice, and righteousness that we have in Jesus. We need this oil in our lamps. Our neighbors, our Church, our nation, and our world need this kind of oil in our lamps.

It is up to us to lead by example. It's time to buck up and buck in. And so, I say to you what I have said many times to my girls. "I know you can do it!"

Amen.