



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### BETHLEHEM...

#### “Above Thy Deep and Dreamless Sleep”

Matthew 25:1-13

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

Dr. Matt Hook

Introduction to Worship: Advent is more than just the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas. Advent is a time of remembering and waiting, not just for the birth of Christ, but for the return of Christ. Way back in the beginning, in Genesis 3, God responds to human sin by cursing the world which He had just made. At the other end of the Bible, Revelation 22:3 announces there will no longer be a curse. All that happens in between is related to God’s efforts to reverse His curse and redeem the creation. We live in that in between time, when God is preparing to bring the world back under His rule. We Christians seek to live under the spiritual ruling of Christ, until He comes again in final victory. So, Advent is a time to detach ourselves from the world long enough to remember we haven’t yet arrived. So we remember, we prepare, we wait, and we look to God: in our profession of faith, in our prayers, in our praise.

Sermon: (Sing) *“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie, above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark street shineth, the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight...”*

How many people here have a spouse who falls asleep in front of the TV? How many people here have ever fallen asleep on the phone with someone? (I fell asleep on the phone one time talking Leigh while we were dating. I don’t recommend it. ☺) Back to Advent. The problem is, while we’re supposed to be waiting, preparing, and looking for Christ to come, many of us fall asleep. The Bible talks about this. In 1 Thessalonians 5:4 *“But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5 You are all sons and daughters of the light and of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.”*

The Greek word “sleep” is *koimao*, meaning a spiritual laziness, distraction, or apathy. While there are attacks on Christianity, I think the outside attacks are nothing compared to this inward threat of “sleep” or indifference. And in this long period of waiting, do you see yourself being lulled into a deep and dreamless sleep—to escape the stress, or the boredom of waiting, forgetting God’s great purposes for our lives. And if we don’t sleep, we let ourselves get so distracted by the daily-ness of life, or the amount of stuff we have, or the way we squeeze any margin out of our lives, we’re as good as asleep. A friend told me this week “I’ve never had more, and yet I’ve never felt more scarce.” It’s like we’ve been in the waiting room so long, we’ve forgotten all about the doctor. We’ve made our purpose nothing more than to be entertained by the waiting room. We get so lost in our “hopes and fears” we forget they are ready to be “met” by God Himself.

Can you imagine having lived in Bethlehem during the time when Jesus was born and missing out on the whole thing, only to hear later about the miracle of His birth? Can you see your friends harass you? “You were there, and you *missed* it? What were you *thinking*?!”

Jesus tells a parable about some bridesmaids who missed His Kingdom party, as He describes what the Kingdom of heaven will be like. Matthew 25:1 *“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five*

were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' 7 Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 9 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' 10 But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The bridesmaids who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. 11 Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' 12 But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' 13 Jesus said, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

You don't hear that one preached too often! A couple things to note: DURING the waiting period, before the bridegroom showed up, all the bridesmaids seemed very much alike. Just like today. There are so many competing voices, it's hard to discern the false ideas from the true. But, Jesus says, when the midnight cry was heard, the difference began to appear. When the Bridegroom was actually there, they were finally divided. And Jesus said, "Therefore, keep watch." Be prepared. The question staring us in the face is "Am I one of the wise, or one of the foolish ones?" To figure that out, let's bring the difference to a head:

**WHAT ARE YOU READY TO LIVE FOR? WHAT ARE YOU READY TO DIE FOR?** Here's how you can tell: It should be our daily concern. He or she who is ready for the marriage feast is ready to live *and* ready to die—ready for anything. So how can you tell? Listen...

A professor placed an I-beam on the floor of his classroom, and asked how many students would walk across it for \$5. Many hands went up. Then he asked "How many would walk across it for a million dollars? All hands went up. He had a few demonstrate, and all saw it could be done. But then he asked "What if the I-beam were stretched across 2 skyscrapers?" Let me ask you this morning: What would you walk across an I-beam for? Make your list! ☺ When I heard this, I came up with my list. And it's not very long! ☺

1. I'd walk across it for God, if he asked.
2. I'd walk across it to save Leigh, or any one of my kids.
3. And I'd do it if it was the only way to get the Gospel to someone, who would otherwise face a Christ-less eternity.

I believe that's how you know you're ready. You've got extra oil for your lamp. Now, **WHY WOULD WE WANT TO BE READY FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD?** Because Jesus said it's going to be a party; not a funeral. Think about it: Jesus broke up every funeral he ever attended! But He started lots of parties! And an eternal party is being thrown—Jesus describes it as a great banquet or a wedding feast; definitely worth the wait! The problem is, we in the church have been acting like it's a funeral, not a feast. No wonder most people don't have a clue! No wonder they'd rather sleep. "Sorry I can't make it. I have to wash my hair." And if they wake up to find it a party, my fear is they'd be so confused they'd become suspicious and wouldn't go in.

**SO, WHAT IS THIS UNREADINESS?** After all, *all* the bridesmaids *looked* ready. They had the lamps, and were companions of the wise bridesmaids. They woke up like the wise ones did when the cry rang out about the groom. But they weren't ready. They had the lamps, external flame, but no back up. No hidden internal oil. Let me ask: Do you have a hidden store of strength? Of hope, of faith, and love? It comes from God's Holy Spirit in your life, often symbolized as oil in Scripture. You're going to need it, Jesus says. Or else you'll run up against something and run off to sleep, just to get away. Do you have back up, to get you to the party? Jesus almost seems to be saying "My Kingdom is worth investing in. The wedding feast is worth the purchase of a little oil."

Notice too that Jesus is saying you can be like either the wise or the foolish. God allows you to choose. You can choose to do nothing in preparation. But Jesus warns us:

**PREPAREDNESS IS NOT TRANSFERABLE...** By the time the Groom came, the wise bridesmaids couldn't share their oil. And *we* can't impart *our* salvation onto someone else. That's because God is love,

and love never forces itself on anyone. Maybe you're here this morning to keep your wife happy, (or your husband happy), or your parents happy... If so, please realize this point in Jesus' message: you can't borrow anyone else's salvation, or preparation. You're not saved by association. Are you foolishly trusting in your relationship with someone other than Christ for your salvation?

Despite their pleas, the foolish bridesmaids were not permitted to enter the wedding... Jesus Himself says "Those unprepared don't receive a second chance." I invite you today to decide now! I invite you to wake up now!

- Don't stay asleep. There's a great story unfolding right where you are!
- Don't be preoccupied. Prepare. Life is difficult. You'll need faith and endurance; not just stuff and worldly goals to get you through it.

Don't give up, even when you feel God is a long time in coming. Wait still. Be steadfast in prayer. Have an attitude of watchfulness. Don't just sleep. Jim Elliot, a young missionary killed in Central America wrote "Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God."

**WHAT IF**...the church were like the oil dealers in Jesus' parable? The ones that the foolish virgins went looking for, even though it was too late for them. Our desire is to persuade anyone and everyone who will listen of the surpassing value of God's coming Kingdom in order that we might fill their oil flask with a hunger and thirst for that Kingdom. We would give them enough light until the time we get there. We study a lot and do a lot. Our interests are wide and varied. But one thing—I hope—underlies everything that we do: we want to help people to trade in a weak and fading love for God's kingdom; for a love that runs deep and strong. To trade in a casual interest for a raging hunger for God. To trade in a commitment that is divided and distracted and asleep for one that is single-minded and focused. We want people to wake up and be ready for action with God! By God's grace, that is what this church is...and what we will continue to be about. Bethlehem... *"Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."*