

“Again With The Waiting?!”

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 + Matthew 25:1-13 = wise and foolish bridesmaids

Ansel Adams, the best known photographer of the Southwest, created what is considered by many to be one of the greatest photographs of all times: *“Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico.”*

I love this photograph ~ mysterious, compelling ~ white gravestones glowing in the foreground; an adobe church; shimmering stripes of clouds; jet black sky; a phosphorescent full moon.



I have stood on the exact spot where Ansel Adams took it but could not possibly take that photo, no one could ~ the conditions came together once and only once for all time. This wonderful photograph was an accident ~ an opportunity to be seized with whole heart or lost.

Adams was returning to Santa Fe after an exhausting day with little to show in October 1941. From the highway, Adams happened to look East just as the sun was setting and the full moon rising over a village.

Adams almost ditched the car and rushed to set up his 8X10 camera. But he could not find his exposure meter! The situation was desperate: the low sun was trailing the edge of clouds in the West, and shadow would soon dim the white crosses. Suddenly he realized he knew the luminance of the full moon and quickly took the shot.¹

Just seconds after he clicked the shutter, the light changed; the sun moved below the horizon and the glow on the gravestones disappeared. The moment was gone ~ but he had the photo because Adams was ready. His rigorous and meticulous attention to detail in preparation paid off in spades. Adam’s philosophy of photography is simple: *“always be ready.”*

Jesus would whole-heartedly agree. In fact that is the exact purpose of his parable today. Jesus explains to us that there are indeed once-in-a-lifetime moments never repeating themselves. Entering God's great end-of-the-age party is one of these moments. The same in life, the same in faith: Ansel Adams' philosophy of photography: *"always be ready."* Jesus' point in this parable: *"always be ready."*



Of course, the lot of a bridesmaid is not easy ~ certainly harder than that of groomsmen. Talk about bridesmaids being prepared, at our wedding in August in Florida, the matron of honor put eight umbrellas in the car just in case. Another made Susan drink out of a sippy cup with a gigantic bib so as not to mess up the dress.

Such is the role of the good bridesmaid, the well prepared bridesmaid, the wise bridesmaid ~ a bridesmaid like Jesus commended ~ attention to every detail, including making sure there is more than enough oil for the lamps to burn all night to light the way to the wedding hall for the groom.

Then there are attendants who don't pay enough attention to details. A former member tells that the one assigned to bring the flower girl's dress forgot it. That would fall under the category of Jesus' foolish bridesmaids ~ not enough attention to the details assigned to her.

Jesus' point: *"Be prepared. Always be ready."*

Jesus has a second, equally important point about the coming of the bridegroom: *"be patient."*

For his acclaimed photographs of Half Dome, Ansel Adams was willing to set up his massive view camera at dawn, then wait all day until the light was absolutely right. He would take a single photo and then pack up his equipment and return home.

Adams had abundant reserves of patience well



beyond the human norm. He had no problem taking a single photo in a whole day, but it was always the perfect one ~ well worth the wait. We need precisely such patience in waiting for God.

As we think about our present situation and look to our future, we see such great need that we are anxious in this present age to 'repair the world.'² Seeing so little evidence of God's intervention, we have given up on God's doing it on our behalf. We think we have to fix it all ourselves. We have succumbed to impatience a long time ago.



When faced with the enormity of the problems in our world; we throw up our hands in exhausted surrender: injustice, environmental degradation, increasing gun violence, war and rumors of war, inequality, our accelerating incivility and fake news passing as fact. We can be great at getting ready for the big events in our lives, the weddings. We are great as well at prep for the special occasions in God's family: Christmas and Easter.

Our difficulty is being ready each moment for the signs of God's activity in our daily lives ~ signs that appear every day, surrounding us, but to which we are almost completely oblivious. For that we need to slow down ~ we need to learn patience, we need awe, we need wonder, we need new eyes for the seeing and new ears for the hearing.



God is everywhere present, wondrously wrapping us with love, protection, provision and guidance. But for most of us, all this falls on deaf ears and blind eyes. Most have lost our childlike sensitivity to Jesus' real presence. We have unlearned awe and lost wonder. The caustic acids of cynicism and pragmatism are just too strong. Our impatience over our imperfect world and the slow pace of improvement gets the best of us.

Jesus' second point in this parable: *"always be patient."*

To apply Jesus' parable, what then do we need to enter God's great marriage party? In this parable, faith is not enough ~ all the bridesmaids had faith. Following Jesus, that alone is not enough. All the bridesmaids were at least Twitter followers or Facebook friends with the bridegroom. Having faith, following Jesus is only enough to find ourselves outside yelling "LORD, LORD let us in."

Right belief, splitting hairs over doctrine, that too is not enough. Neither is it enough to follow a formula, to make the right profession of faith, to say the right words in worship, to sing the right songs, to construct the right liturgy, pray the perfect prayer. None of these in and of themselves will get us into God's marriage feast.

Being unprepared and impatient, foolish maids burn their lamps long and hard in a great show of faith, hope and charity, thinking that outward spectacle is enough. The wise maidens actually live faith, hope and charity by choosing to act on what they can in fact influence, that is, whether or not they have oil, rather than worrying about what they cannot do ~ determine the bridegroom's time of arrival.³



We are advised to do the same ~ make those private choices and incremental changes in our lives, our homes and communities that we actually have control over, simple acts of love; rather than chasing after unobtainable rainbows, spouting high blown platitudes, intending good things, but ignoring the small acts of kindness which we could have done, should have done. These are important.

To become a part of God's family, Jesus counsels patience and being always ready to join the great marriage feast of the Lamb ~ waiting with deep and abiding patience for the many signs of God's love in our lives ~ waiting with rapt anticipation for Christ's coming ~ waiting with childlike awe and love struck wonder for God speaking to us and through us ~ letting God permeate our minds and souls ~ being ready moment to moment for Jesus' coming, that is, advent into our hearts.



¹ Housatonic Museum of Art, Housatonic Community College, Bridgeport, CT
<<http://www.hcc.commnet.edu/artmuseum/anseladams/details/moonrise.html>>

² *tikkun olam* in Jewish theology.

³ Mark Labberton, “*Living the Word*” *Christian Century* 11/1/2011 p. 20