

How many times have you failed to heed the Boy Scout motto: BE PREPARED. I once headed off to teach Time Management to a group of librarians in Kokomo, Indiana, back in the days before Mapquest or even PCs. I allowed time for the highway part of the trip but failed to estimate how long it would take on county roads, with school buses and farm trucks. I was 45 minutes late for Time Management. One time our family of 5 headed off to grandma's on a frosty Thanksgiving morn, thinking we could get gas on the way. Nope. Nothing open, even on the interstate. Modern living is like that: We won't stop to take care of our needs as they arise. We wait for a better time, a better price, a better opportunity. So, we're always Running on Empty. But at any moment, it could be too late. As it is for the five maidens who wait to buy lamp-oil until the last minute. When they return from the store and beg, "Lord, Lord, let us in!" – it's too late. The party's already started. The parable is a cautionary tale about being prepared. Festive weddings, and the need to prepare for them, are motifs in the gospel accounts of Jesus. The action in John's gospel begins with Jesus and his mother at a wedding in Cana, where Jesus saves the unprepared host who has run out of good wine. In Matthew, Chapter 9,

¹⁴ ... the disciples of John came to Jesus, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." Do you remember the parable in Matt. 22 about the king's wedding banquet for his son? The invited guests fail to show up.

⁸ The King said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' That, too, is a cautionary tale: One poor fellow rounded up off the street enters the party without proper attire. Never mind the unexpected invitation, or the short notice: The king throws the guest into outer darkness. Just showing up isn't enough to enter the party. In that parable, and in the Ten Bridesmaids story, Jesus is saying, in effect, For the Final Banquet, the great feast at the end of time, you had better be more than simply present and accounted for. Be prepared. Don't think you can coast to the finish line, Running on Empty, and expect to enter God's presence. To fully appreciate the Ten Bridesmaids story we need a little cultural background from the times. A bridal party assembles at the Groom's home, while the Groom visits the Bride's father to settle upon a dowry. Once that's negotiated, the Bride and Groom go to his home to begin the wedding. Assuming this is to be an evening wedding, it could be expected to start on time. The bridesmaids have no reason

to prepare for a long wait.
 But this wedding is delayed by the groom.
 All ten bridesmaids fall asleep waiting.
 Everyone's torch gutters out.
 We are told five bridesmaids are prudent.
 They bring flasks of oil, just in case they need it.
 Perhaps these five over-functioning maidens
 know the groom and his tardy habits.
 Lo and behold, the groom and bride arrive.
 Finally, it's the moment the maidens
 have been waiting for.
 The women smooth their hair
 and shake the wrinkles out of their dresses.
 They snip off the charred edges of their torches,
 and pull out fresh wicking.
 Get ready to form the procession!
 Light the way for the bridal couple!
 Five of them replenish their lamps with oil,
 ready to go.
 The other five look on in expectation of assistance.
 "Could you spare a little of your oil, please?"
 For whatever reason, the prudent maidens
 are unsympathetic to the other five.
 'No,' comes the abrupt reply.
 'We don't have enough to share.'
 'Go to Royal Farms and buy your own fuel.'
 And they do.
 They rush back, banging on the door,
 "Lord, Lord, let us in!"
 Sorry. No admittance.
 Adding insult to injury, their friend, the groom,
 acts like a stranger.
 'Believe me, I don't know you.'
 I can empathize with the unprepared maidens.
 They expect the world to work a certain way,
 and it doesn't.
 There are some positive aspects to our parable.
 No one behaves badly.

The ten maidens treat one another ethically.
 The five prudent maidens do not chide the others.
 The five foolish maidens do not scorn tradition.
 All ten awaken at the cry, Here comes the Groom.
 The prudent girls preserve their oil for a reason:
 Better that 5 torches stay lit than all 10 go out.
 I think these ten women represent the normal,
 typical ways you and I approach life's uncertainty.
 I had the pleasure of hearing
 Barbara Brown Taylor speak on parables
 at a preaching conference.
 She marveled at how the parables
 set just enough of a scene for our imaginations
 to supply the human motives:
*A citizen lay on the side of the road,
 beaten by robbers...but a Samaritan came near.
 A man had two sons,
 and the younger son squandered his inheritance ...
 A landowner went to hire laborers for his vineyard
 and said, I will pay you whatever is right...*
 Even worlds removed, the stories are tantalizing.
 We come back to the parables again and again,
 and each time find something new to think about:
 But the savvy preacher Barbara Brown Taylor
 warns, "Don't take a parable too seriously.
 Relax into it. It's just a story.
 It didn't really happen.
 Or it might have happened.
 Or it does happen. All the time."
 Go ahead and identify
 with the maidens in the story.
 Wouldn't any of us feel hurt
 if good Christian friends turned us down
 when we asked for a little help?
 Haven't we all been caught unprepared,
 when life deals an unexpected blow
 and the foundation of our faith is shaken?

It would be a mistake to label five as winners,
 five as losers; five as full, five as empty.
 All of us want to feel good
 about being part of the "right" crowd,
 the wise and vindicated ones.
 All ten represent earnest disciples.
 Disciples can be in either group
 at any given time,
 prepared or unprepared.
 "Christ will come again in glory
 to judge the living and the dead."
 Many disciples will come to the party
 a bit short of whatever it takes
 to join the celebration.
 What we all need, but few of us have,
 is sufficient fuel on-board
 to power us through an untimely loss.
 We may have barrels of **faith** stashed away,
 in terms of Christian **values** learned and lived.
 We may understand spiritual combustion,
 and know how to stoke fire through **scripture**.
 We may think we know what Jesus would do
 if all the lights of **hope** went out.
 But if we don't have spiritual fuel when we need it,
 we're Running on Empty.
 Our faith community — that's the 'filling station'
 for spiritual fuel, not only through **worship**,
 but also through **prayer, fellowship, and care**.
 The community loves us when we're unlovable.
 It checks our selfish impulses
 and curbs our self-righteousness.
 The community stirs us to action
 when we would be complacent.
 It speaks out when no one of us would.
 It holds us to the highest ethical standards.
 It shares our pain, magnifies our blessings,
 and multiplies our joys.
 It puts our life struggles into proper context

in the goodness of God's creation.
 Vibrant congregations still make mistakes;
 mistakes are part of the family story.
 We are all prodigals.
 We do not become perfect
 when we belong to a faith community.
 We belong because we are all imperfect.
 We do not gain entrance to the Kingdom
 because we belong to a faith community.
 We belong because none of us could ever
 gain entrance on our own merits.
 We are all hired at the last minute
 for a full day's wage.
 We are not set apart from (or above) the world
 because we belong to a faith community.
 We belong because, like the Good Samaritan,
 our neighborhood is the world.
 Christ will come again in glory
 to judge the living and the dead (*Nicene Creed*).
 Jesus is warning followers to be vigilant,
 for the End of Time could happen any moment.
 But we have been living 2000 years in the hope
 that Jesus the Bridegroom will return.
 Small wonder that popular soothsayers
 regularly identify biblical signs of pending doom.
 Maintaining a state of constant preparedness
 is an existential burden.
 Remember the Cold War?
 Can't we be excused
 for Running on Empty, spiritually?
 Try to imagine Perpetual Vigilance for one year.
 I'll use for an example the year 1968.
 No one's lamp could hold enough optimism
 to last that long, fateful year.
 · For me, 1968 starts in Pasadena, California.
 Indiana University makes it to the Rose Bowl,
 and I am playing trombone in the Marching 100.
 We arrive at our starting place in darkness,
 standing in position, expecting a three-hour wait.

The lead units enter the Rose Parade at 9 AM.
 But it's another hour before our band is called.
 What started out as a black, chill pre-dawn
 is now a cloudless 80-degree mid-morning.
 It's hard to stay awake.
 We enter the 5-mile parade Running on Empty.
 · Just 30 days later, on the Asian New Year's day,
 the Viet Cong launch the stunning Tet offensive
 against American and South Vietnamese troops.
 U.S. defensive action sets the Cong back sufficiently
 that General Westmoreland requests
 200,000 more troops.
 President Johnson turns him down.
 As regards Viet Nam, at this point
 the American public is Running on Empty.
 · New Year's Day plus two months and 16 days,
 U.S. soldiers commit atrocities
 against 140 civilians at My Lai.
 · New Year's Day plus three months and 4 days,
 an assassin kills Martin Luther King Jr.
 in Memphis. Riots erupt in major cities.
 Presidential campaigns rev up.
 · New Year's Day plus five months and 5 days,
 an assassin kills Robert F. Kennedy
 in the same Los Angeles hotel ballroom
 in which I had eaten lunch after the Rose Parade.
 A nation is Running on Empty.
 · New Year's Day, 1968, plus 6 months:
 A coup in Iraq elevates a politician
 named Saddam Hussein to power.
 · New Year's Day, 1968, plus nine months:
 The Army and the Marines start sending
 24,000 troops back to Viet Nam
 for involuntary second tours.
 The nation's still Running on Empty.
 · New Year's Day 1968 plus 11 months, 24 days:
 Apollo 8 astronauts enter lunar orbit,
 giving humanity its first glimpse
 of the back side of the moon.

On Christmas Eve, astronauts beam words
 back to Earth, words taken from Genesis 1 and 2.
 And after a whole year of Running on Empty,
 finally, finally . . . we are filled with awe!
 On New Year's Day 1968, our nation had no idea
 how much hope we would need in our lamps
 to lighten the darkness of 11 months and 24 days.
 No idea how ineffectual words of scripture
 would seem against a world dead-set against us.
 No idea how much prayer we would need
 to weather two political assassinations.
 No idea how much faith we would need
 to restore our national pride and purpose.
 No idea how much compassion we would need
 for veterans eventually returning from war.
 And yet, before the year 1968 was over,
 one singular image filled our lamps,
 an image of a Big Blue Marble in space.
 It was not until this stunning photo came back
 with the Apollo 8 astronauts
 in late December 1968
 that we saw Earth as a vibrant, delicate,
 blue and white globe set against
 the velvety blackness of space.
 From the great distance of the Moon,
 we all saw our common, fragile habitat.
 All year long we had been asking, Lord, Lord,
 open the gates of salvation for our nation.
 Finally, everyone in our nation was present,
 spiritually fulfilled in a singular moment.
 No one was left outside the door.

CONCLUSION

Christ will come again in glory
 to judge the living and the dead.
 We cannot know where or when.
 We must not let our spiritual selves
 Run on Empty.
 We must be prepared to be light
 to a dark, forbidding world. Amen.