Message: "Faith's Vigilance Requirement"
Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13

> 25"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. [2]Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. [3]When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; [4]but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. [5]As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. [6]But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' [7]Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. [8]The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' [9]But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' [10]And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. [11]Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' [12]But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' [13]Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Many of you know I grew up in Boulder, Colorado, precisely three miles from this (Flatirons) – the front range of the Rocky Mountains. I never grew tired of this view from my house – the mountains were so picturesque, so unique, and so accessible that they sort of became a part of my being. I felt like they beckoned to me, and I thought about them all the time; I thought about how incredibly adventurous it would be to explore them and discover their mysteries – it was thus that at an early age I became sort of fixated on backpacking. I joined the Boy Scouts largely because I knew they spent time in the mountains; I joined Indian Guides, for the same reason. Both of these groups drilled into my mind the importance of being prepared for life, especially for whatever nature might throw at you. I was determined to be prepared for adventuring into the wild, so for my birthdays and Christmas's from about age eight on I would ask for my gifts to be associated with backpacking; I saved my allowance to purchase a water purifying system, a zero-degree sleeping bag, and a Whisperlite white-gas stove, things that would more than handle anything the Rocky Mountains could throw at me. I subscribed to Backpacker magazine; I purchased Backpacker handbooks to go alongside my Boy Scout manual which had a lot of information about surviving in the wilderness. Once I could drive, I drove my dad's pickup truck which was a great wilderness vehicle, able to reach trailheads deep in the forest with all my gear intact. So it came to be that by the time I was about seventeen I had accumulated enough gear of pretty high quality to mount an expedition to Mt. Everest let alone the Rocky Mountains.

But I had yet to make my first real backpacking trip, you know, where you actually spend a whole night in a tent in a place other than your parent's backyard? Or somewhere more wild than an established campground in a national park with your parents. I had hiked all over the place but never with a 50-pound backpack

carrying everything I needed for overnight camping. So the time came when three of my high school friends invited me to join them on what would be my first official backpacking trip; it was to be four days and three nights up in the Indian Peaks Wilderness area above Nederland, Colorado, around forty miles from Boulder. Perfect, I thought; I was so ready. I packed up my backpack as the handbooks and magazines described, I put in my fancy gear, my water filtration system, my zero-degree sleeping bag, and my gas stove; I loaded up everything into my dad's truck, picked up my friend Mike, and we headed up to the trailhead. I was confident I had thought of everything.

It turns out, as you can probably guess, that I had not thought of everything at all. I had thought Mike was more experienced at backpacking than I was, but it turns out this was his first trip as well. I had thought that Mike knew where the trailhead was, and he thought I did – we were both clueless, except for the general destination. We arrived at the main parking area to discover there were several trailheads that started that took off from there, and we had no real clue as to which one was the right one. We did go ahead and choose what looked like the main trail, but we both had our doubts. As we hiked we came across a few other hikers coming down that trail; we asked them if they had seen any backpackers along the route; they all said they hadn't. We asked about the trail ahead, and I remember one of them eyeing our backpacks, which were very heavy. "You won't make it very far with those on your backs" he said, and he described the aggressive nature of the trail they had just navigated. I'm not sure, but I seem to remember he and his partner leaving us shaking their head in disbelief. More unpleasantness followed; It wasn't long before we discovered how important it would have been to have started a lot earlier in the day, for we had arrived at the trailhead in late afternoon; after hiking in a mile or so, it was becoming dark and we were having trouble reading the trail – that's when we discovered that the flashlights we had both brought had dead batteries. Finally, we gave up, returned to my dad's pickup truck, laid out our sleeping bags in the open back of the truck, and tried to get some sleep.

Do you know how hard it is to sleep on the metal bed of a pickup truck?

Do you know that, above 9,000 feet elevation, where we were, it can drop to well below freezing at night even in the middle of summer?

Do you know that, even at 9,000 feet and with temperatures below freezing, it can still rain at midnight?

I know these things now.

I could go on and on and on with the details of this misadventure of mine, but I think you get the picture. I had discovered the age-old truth that thinking about something, even thinking obsessively about something, was not the same as being ready for that something.

Jesus is making the same point in the parable of the ten bridesmaids; it is a pretty obvious point, obvious like the nose on one's face. You'd have to go back historically and culturally to Jesus's day and how weddings were extended affairs with bridesmaids and wedding party members waiting upon different phases of bride and groom appearances and functions; it would not be that strange to have a scheduled appearance of the bridegroom delayed for various reasons. It feels like a normal expectation for the bridesmaids to tend to the lighting of the festivities at night and therefore had the responsibility for lamps being ready for use. Thus, the five bridesmaids who brought extra oil were wise in having thought ahead about the possibility of a delay, whereas the five bridesmaids who had no extra oil were foolish in having failed to consider such a possibility.

This parable is quite problematic if one begins to think of all the implications that are in here. Yes, it is obviously a parable about vigilance, about how important it is to be ready for any big event – but did Jesus have to label the five who weren't prepared foolish, and the ones who were prepared wise? Weren't the foolish ones more absent-minded and thus excusable, like each one of us might be? Weren't the wise maidens selfish, refusing to be generous, again like any of us might be? I mean, might it not be that the foolish five who didn't bring enough oil were trying to lower their carbon footprint and reduce hydrocarbon emissions by conserving their fuel? And might it be that the so-called wise maidens were excessive in their oil consumption, making our climate change situation worse? Commentators point out that the so-called wise bridesmaids may have been wise but they were also cold, reducing the size of the reception committee by half. Those foolish bridesmaids may have made a very human mistake of not preparing for a possible delay, but their greater foolishness may have been in missing the great event of the groomsman's appearance for the sake of looking for a 24-hour Quick Mart selling lamp oil. Round and round the comments go, flailing this parable this way and that, trying to reveal an eternal truth useful to people of faith in any age. Such flailing is unnecessary here, I feel, for Jesus is stating an obvious constant in our faith regardless of possibilities of the future – that faithful vigilance is all the preparation we need for the future.

"Keep awake" is how Jesus puts it; to keep faithfully attentive to the things that matter in the here and now is the best preparation for an unpredictable future. There are many ways we have to describe this point Jesus is making -- Stick to your guns; stay steady in the storm; remain truthful in the midst of deceit; apply high ideals against low morals; keep your head while others are losing theirs; speak truth to power; go high when others go low. These are not platitudes so much as practices to employ from the grounding of faith, practices which are especially important to apply when things are not as they should be, whether it be a bridegroom's delay or a world going off the rails. These are practices which help to retain the vision of a promising future while struggling with a depressing present. It is in keeping faithful vigilance that we keep hope in view, and thus keep hope alive.

The last ten years or so have seen this kind of vigilance being practiced in many areas of our country in an especially significant way. As we have seen over the last decade, when things get bad, I mean really bad, with scenarios we hadn't thought possible and depravity going on for so long unchecked by the powers designed to check them, it raises awareness through the heightened senses of pain and loss. Our vigilance as a nation exponentially increased once Renee Good and Alex Pretti were shot and killed by ICE; our attention was immediately focused when one third of the White House was torn down unceremoniously and illegally; it was obvious to many that a war of choice in the Mideast was not a good idea; it would seem that no one can miss the flagrant corruption and conflicts of interest happening at the highest levels of our government. It's gone on for so very long, but, as of last Tuesday, the result of the vigilance of millions of Americans had change voted in – at least, the potential for significant, meaningful change to redress the incredible wrongs we've been watching and despairing over for years. It calls to mind something Winston Churchill said about the progress of World War II when the Allies had finally defeated the Axis powers in northern Africa -- We are not at the beginning of the end of the darkness that has assailed us; but we are perhaps at the end of the beginning of the needed change that we've been waiting and watching for these past many years. It's brought to light something we must keep in mind for whatever comes in the future: Faithful attention keeps in sight what is wrong in order to prepare for making things right.

I'm pretty sure that something good and deep is stirring in our country, and perhaps in the world, but the stirring has just begun, and must be empowered intentionally if it is to make the kind of progress desperately needed by our

hurting world. We are entering a time where faithful vigilance needs to be kicked into high gear as we watch for and work for the changes needed to bring our world out of its misalignment and into a more just and equitable platform for life, human and otherwise. It begins with each one of us, in our individual scrutiny of our own hearts, our own motivations, our own brokenness and redemption. But it continues beyond us into the world around us; we must keep watch over the turning of the world and the darkness that always, always threatens the light – and we must understand that we each have a part to play in bringing the extra oil of God's grace into play, that the light never runs out.