## *Amos 5:18-24*

## *Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*

(Matthew 25:1-13 is the gospel lesson of the day.)

Another mass shooting. This time in the most sacred of spaces: the sanctuary of a church during Sunday worship. A truck, a car, a rented van mow down helpless pedestrians and cyclists. Concert goers are slaughtered by an assassin they will never see high above them. Desperate refugees flee their homes and head for their country's border as they leave the dead bodies of their loved ones behind. Wind and water destroy the lives of those in destruction's path. Condolences reverberate through the media, social and otherwise. *Our thoughts and prayers are with you. Our thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers.*

The demands of life draw well-meaning people away from tragedy. Until the next time. Shocked and saddened, they – we - respond: *Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers.* Until the next time. And the next.

A people long ago have survived persecution and discrimination because of their faith. They have had the great good fortune to put down roots and some are growing prosperous, though not all of them. God sends a prophet to bring the word of the Lord and the people listen with bright faces and great anticipation. Surely the coming day of the Lord will bring light and more blessings upon them. But this prophet preaches darkness and gloom. “God hates your festivals and your sacrifices and your worship,” the prophet tells them. “Your music is just noise to God.” The people are shocked. They do everything right. Their worship is beautiful and faithful, they think. They give back to God what God has given them: a portion of the land, fatted animals, burnt offerings. How could God hate and despise what they have worked so hard to accomplish? What more does God want from them? The prophet proclaims their efforts empty. Darkness descends upon their hearts, their daily work, their solemn assemblies.

Are the people even listening to what the prophet says next? They must, for the prophet's words of condemnation are followed by words of hope and life. The long-anticipated day of the Lord is here, the prophet promises. “But listen closely,” he tells them. “God doesn't care about what you have or how you live or the sounds of your worship, unless... Unless your lives are given to the work of God, to the tireless pursuit of justice and righteousness, justice that rolls down like waters, and righteousness that flows like an everflowing stream.” God has not given the people what they have so they can keep it for themselves. God does not desire for them to gather within walls that keep out the cries of the poor and the suffering. God wants nothing of empty sacrifices and recited prayers that demand nothing of the one who prays. Instead, God wills God's people to be silent until they hear God's voice call them into the light in which he desires them to live.

“I take no delight in your Sunday worship, in the singing of your hymns, in the praying of your prayers. I want nothing of the noise of your gatherings. Unless...” It is hard for *us* to get to God's “unless.” For how could God find fault with we who gather so faithfully, to read scripture and hear sermons and pray for the world? What more does God want from us? We say the right thing when tragedy strikes. *Our thoughts and prayers are with you.* And they are. Until we are called back to the minutia of each day, the busyness of work and family. *Our thoughts and prayers.* We forget God's hope for us, if we ever understood it in the first place, that prayer be more about the quietness of our hearts than the words of our mouths. God desires that our prayers still us so we can hear God's voice, so we can learn the ways in which God would have us go, in the next minutes or days or years or lifetimes. *Our thoughts and prayers*. How empty those well-meaning words are if they do not lead us back to God, if they do not move us to ask God what we can do to change the lives of those for whom we pray.

“I want none of your empty words and sounds. Unless...” That one word speaks hope. It ushers in the day of the Lord for which we wait, the light that pierces our darkness. *Our thoughts and prayers are with you.* We utter our wishes for those who suffer. And then we offer our thoughts and prayers to God. To the “unless” that joins us to the heart of God. Justice and righteousness are the power of God whose flowing waters bring life to the most barren and hopeless people and places in this world. “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” Every time tragedy strikes someone we love, we ask God, “How can I bring your light into his or her darkness?” Every time we encounter another way in which one group of people pushes down another, we ask God, “How can we be the voice of hope and freedom?” Every time we face the truth of human rights abuses or the brutality of war or the widespread dismissal plight of the poor or the slaughter of innocents, we ask God, “How can we, maybe not alone, maybe along with others of faith, with all that we are and all that we have, fight that kind of injustice?”

We bridesmaids await the arrival of our bridegroom, Jesus. We eagerly yearn for the day when all the world will be filled with light and life. Until that time, we trim our wicks and gather fuel for our lamps. We listen for the voice of God in the stillness of the dark night, calling us to bear grace and peace to our friends and families and neighbors, to let go of what we have so we can be swept along in the flow of all that God desires for this world. We gather to hear God's word, to sing and to pray, not in empty offering to God, but because we know God will change us in our encounter with the Holy One here.

*Thoughts and prayers.* The words can be such empty noise to those who hear them. Maybe even to the ears of God. Unless... Unless they begin in the heart of God and flow into us like a stream that never ends. Unless they turn us to God, shut our mouths and open our ears to hear God's voice. God's voice calling us to lives of tireless pursuit of justice and righteous in an unjust and unrighteous world, lives in which the light of Christ shines into the darkness of our hearts, light that flows through us it reaches those who live in utter darkness.

Amen.

*Pentecost 22A*

*November 12, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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*Matthew 25:1-13*