

We gather this Sunday in a time of fullness, at the tail end of a season of harvest. We are far from an agrarian society any longer, but the seasons still tug on us like the pull of the moon on waxing waves. Over the next several Sundays we are called to celebrate harvest, not only of the food and drink of our daily lives, but of our liturgical lives as well. Our calendar is winding down as we approach the end of this season after Pentecost, this season of ordinary time, this season where we focus on the work of the church. We are at the culmination of a full and ripe harvest.

What strange words, then, we seem to hear in today's readings. From Joshua we hear "choose:" choose to serve God at this moment when Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey, has finally come to be their own. They are called to look beyond the harvest that Canaan represents to choose their future with God. In Paul's letter we hear him tell the people of Thessalonica to anticipate the fullness of what Christ's resurrection means. And in the gospel reading from Matthew we hear that we are to "watch and prepare."

In this time of fullness the operative words seem to be, "Choose. Anticipate. Watch. Stay alert. Prepare." We might expect rather that the words would be "Eat. Drink. Be Merry." Sit back and enjoy. The harvest is here. Kick your feet up.

Perhaps these 10 bridesmaids might help us to understand why God is calling us into a different posture. According to William Barclay in this parable Jesus describes the backdrop to the typical Jewish weddings of his time. In first century Palestine marriages were arranged, and it was not uncommon that the bride-and-groom-to-be would have never met, and in fact may live some distance apart. And so the wedding would be arranged, and the provisions for the ceremony and feast would be gathered to the groom's home. The bride and bridesmaids would journey to the groom's house as well, and await his arrival outside the dwelling. The groom may arrive shortly, or he may be days off. Since women were not permitted on the streets in the dark of night they would carry a lamp and oil with them as their light. When the groom was sighted word would go out that he was arriving, and that the wedding would commence soon. Now in that time the newlyweds did not go off for a weeklong ocean-side honeymoon. When the groom arrived at his home, the guests were allowed in and the door was shut. What then ensued was a great feast, and for the week afterward the couple entertained guests and were treated like royalty.

Now this is the context from which Jesus gives his parable. He is teaching us the importance of preparation and readiness in a time of great fullness: the wedding feast signals the culmination of all things as they have been AND it signals a new beginning, a new creation. Anyone who has been involved with the preparation of a wedding – either for themselves or for another – knows that the year or more of preparation comes to a 20-30 minute climax in the marriage ceremony. But the mistake is often made that this event is the culmination when in actuality it is really the beginning. The fullness is realized over the course of the decades of marriage. The feast is intended to be found in the daily life lived out. If the bride and the groom – or those supporting them – fail to recognize this reality then they engage in the new beginning as if there are only dying embers left, as if they brought only enough oil for their lamps to make it to the door. Jesus is telling us our life in Christ is no different. Each season of fullness brings us to a season of new life. Our task, our posture then, is to be one of searching and waiting for God to lead us to the next new manifestation of our life together.

We know that the unfolding of God's kingdom happens stepwise; we know that this is a process, a movement from fullness to fullness, from grace to grace. And we know that the landscape of the time between can be extremely rough. One hundred forty-five years ago our

U.S. president proclaimed these words: “That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, ...shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom... And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.” The Emancipation Proclamation was a fullness of sorts, but it was not complete. Last Tuesday, a century and a half later a new fullness and a new creation was achieved for African-Americans in this land. Setting the politics aside – on a purely human level – we all witnessed a new sense of the fullness of the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” The process has been for our black brothers and sisters difficult beyond my imagining, but without those painful preparatory steps the equal probability of achieving the highest office in the land would have remained in darkness.

And what is true on a national level holds true on our smaller scale. After all what we watch and prepare for are new manifestations of God’s love in our world. We know something about harnessing God’s love in a new way. Several years ago an ecumenical group of folks decided that to effectively feed the hungry in South Hall County a partnership of churches was required. What began as a small, two-hours-a-week operation involving three churches has grown into a ministry that offers food three days a week and is on the brink of adding its fifth participating church. Not too long ago a group of women had the vision that to make our prayers tactile and palpable for those suffering in body, mind, or spirit – or celebrating an important event – was to make God present in a new way. The quilting ministry was born, and now prayer quilts enfold those close to us in our prayers of love and healing. This past year we have seen the new formation of a men’s group, who gather monthly on Saturday mornings to share fellowship and to find new ways of feeding one another and serving our God. We can speak of the new creation our choir continues to become. And the list goes on and on... This is the fullness in which we gather ourselves.

But Christ is calling us to a different set of questions? What lies on the horizon for St. Gabriel’s? What next fullness are we being prepared to receive? Could it be a new relationship far beyond our doors? You may not be aware that the beautiful pottery that Margie Robins has been offering at the Fall Festival and in the parish hall comes from a small village in Nicaragua that Margie’s uncle’s church in Virginia visits once or twice a year on medical missions. What if we were to partner with them in this ministry? What if we brought something new – we ARE pretty handy with hammers and saws! – to their mission? Might that be a direction God is calling us towards? What other opportunities lie ahead?

In this season of fullness – which may seem to be filled more with uncertainty than promise – we can be certain of one thing: God does not call us into stagnation or lifelessness. God’s greatest desire is that we grow in that fullness that this season represents. This morning we dedicate this banner that is the sacramental sign of our process of self-discovery that we all underwent last year. It is an outward and visible sign of the grace found in recognizing ourselves as “a vibrant, growing, and welcoming community of faith feeding the hearts, minds, and spirits of all who come.” To God’s call to watch, anticipate, choose, we have responded: Find. Feed. Fill. Find the hungry in body, mind, and spirit. Feed them (and us) with the love of God, the bread that never fails. Fill ourselves, our baskets, our oil flasks, for the care and love of the

world. We will find what God is calling us into in those three words: Find. Feed. Fill. We cannot afford to sit back on fullness. We cannot afford to quail in the face of our uncertain times. That is not who we are. We are Gabriel. Recall that it is Gabriel, when delivering news of fullness, who responds to Mary's "How can this be?" with the words that define us to the core: "Nothing will be impossible with God."