

Today's scriptures are intended to challenge us. They would have us ask if we are ready for whatever God is doing in our lives and in this world. Are we prepared to be faithful to God, no matter what? And the big question: Whom do we serve in our lives, God or something else??

Ten maidens were called to be bridal attendants. It wasn't like the bridesmaids of today. These had a specific function, to keep their lamps burning so as to guide the way of the bridal party when the bridegroom arrived. Their job was to always have their lamps burning and not to let them die. These things could be quite drawn out, and the wait Jesus told about was no exception, for the groom was delayed. In the course of the night, five of the maidens realized that they had underestimated how much oil they would need; their lamps were in danger of going out. So they asked the other girls to share. This would be a fine thing to do under normal circumstances, but on the wedding night, where there were no street-lamps and where their services were necessary for the safety of the wedding party, the other girls could not share without risking the ability of their own lamps to last until the bridegroom arrived. So they refused their "lamp-mates," and did not share. Even though it was in the middle of the night, the short-on-oil girls left to try to find some more oil. Unfortunately for them, while they were off looking, they missed the arrival of the bridegroom. So they missed out. They missed doing what they had been called to do. They missed the celebration.

In the Book of Joshua, Joshua gave the people a short history lesson on all the ways God had been with them, and then he defined for them their choice. They could worship the gods of their ancestors or of the other people around them, or they could decide to serve God who had seen them through everything thus far. The message was: You must choose. Not choosing is a choice against serving God.

So what about OUR choices today? Whom are *we* serving in our lives? We can go along on our merry or not-so-merry ways, making it as well as we can until we finally die, *OR*, we can choose to live for God. Yes or no, that's the choice.

To live for God means to have "oil" in our lamps. There's an old Christian Song that goes: "O give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning; O give me oil in my lamp, I pray. O Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, keep me burning till the break of day.." This is a good prayer for all of us Christians who get so busy or pressured by everything around us that we really don't know if the bridegroom (Jesus) is even expected anytime soon. Maybe the bridegroom has forgotten to come? The Bible promises that he will come again, and that he is here, even now.

According to Jesus, what we are called to do is to love God and to love our neighbors, as hard as that often is. We are called to pray for our enemies and to do good to those who would try to hurt us. We are asked to respond to the needs of other people, whether they're lying in a ditch looking untouchable or dying of hunger in a country we cannot even locate on a map. We are to give our excess "stuff" to those who don't have enough, whether that "stuff" is a coat or a dollar. We are

to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick, to respond as best we can to the lonely. By this, our lamps shine in the dark world, and they will not go out because we are serving God.

Joshua listed for the people the ways God's care could be seen through their history. But right then, as they settled into the promised land, they were surrounded by all sorts of religions. If crops failed, the people were tempted to try a sacrifice to Baal, the way their neighbors did. They were tempted to serve other gods when it seemed that to do so might bring some benefit.

Kissing the dice before the roll, checking one's horoscope... What if somebody told us that there was a "god of Credit," able to transform near bankruptcy into an 800+ credit score? Or a "Tree of Money," where, if you would simply lay your monthly bills at the foot of the tree and bow to that tree, they bills would all be paid? I've heard folks say, "Sure, if this or that will make my life better or easier, it won't hurt to give it a try."

But wait: That's not what the Christian faith is about! It's not about making it so that we get what we want! It's not about making life easy! It's not even about making sure we're on the reservation list for eternal life! It is about *obedience*, doing what God has asked us to do in our life right now. It is about trust, trusting God even when things aren't going the way we want them to go. It is about faith: believing that the Shepherd is watching over us even when we feel totally abandoned or let down or overwhelmed, because we have made the choice to serve God and nothing else.

Preacher Robert S. Crilley once wrote about today's scripture: Usually, it is the people who call out, and *they* who must wait upon the Lord's reply. Here, surprisingly, the roles are reversed: the call has gone out -- only this time it is heaven which must await a reply.... This is the reason the question is so urgent for Joshua -- heaven is waiting for a response! (inspired by a sermon by Robert S. Crilley, found at [esermons.com](http://esermons.com))

We have choices, every day.

We choose whether to love or to hate, to give or to hoard, to become involved or to withdraw. We choose to reach out and mend a torn relationship or to let it continue to unravel at the seams. We decide whether to apologize for hurtful words or to add another brick to the wall of silent tension that exists between us and our neighbor. We choose whether to devote our life to something that will mean a difference in this world or to settle into our own little comforts, embracing seclusion, not wanting to get involved. The decision is ours. The opportunity is now. But realize: God may very well be waiting!

Presbyterian preacher/professor/writer Thomas G. Long (2004 sermon, "Is There Joy In God's House?") told of a woman struggling to reestablish a relationship with her father. "When I was a child," she recalled, "my dad and I were as close as we could be. And the times I knew it best would be at those family reunions, when after the big meal, they'd move all the furniture, crank up the stereo, and start playing polka records -- one after another. Eventually, someone would put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' It was our special song. And my father would come over with outstretched hand and say, 'Come on, girl, let's roll them blues away!' And we'd dance -- my father and I --

we'd dance.

"As a teenager, however, I started to despise the silliness of those family get-togethers. I remember one occasion in particular when, for reasons known only to adolescents, I sat moping on the sofa in one of those don't-associate-with-anybody moods. As the 'Beer Barrel Polka' began to play, my father came over with outstretched hand. But I glared at him with icy indifference. 'Just leave me alone,' I muttered under my breath. Startled, he turned, and never invaded my privacy again. He danced with my mother, he danced with my sisters, but not with me. 'I'd come home late at night from a date, and he'd be waiting for me in the old chair -- his bathrobe loosely tied at the waist, an opened book in his lap, half asleep. 'What are you doing up?' I'd say. 'Why don't you just go to bed?' He'd look at me with sad, pleading eyes and whisper, 'I was just waiting for you, that's all. I was just waiting for you.'

"I was glad to leave that house when I finally graduated high school. My father and I had a distant, formal relationship, but not much more. Eventually, though, I began to miss what we had once enjoyed, only I wasn't quite sure how to bridge the gap. Until one day, when I happened to be home for a family reunion, and somebody put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' As my father walked across the room, I went up to him with outstretched hand and said, 'Daddy, I believe this is our dance.' He looked at me and smiled, and said, 'I've been waiting for you. I've been waiting for you.' " (adapted from Day1.org)

The God who brought us into being calls us by our names and now waits for us to discover the truth of life and to hear his call to us: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor. We choose whom we will serve, and we choose whether or not we will let our lamps be filled... God waits.

"As for me and my household," Joshua proclaimed, "we will serve the Lord." And each of us can also proclaim through our every day: I will serve the Lord by letting my lamp be filled with the oil of obedience, to share the light and love of Christ with all on my path.

God waits. The time is now. The choice is ours. Choose this day and every day whom you will serve. Amen.