MYERS PARK COVENANT CHURCH

"WHEN THE TORNADO STRIKES"

Sermon Delivered by Dr Reverend Tim Moore

Matthew 25:1-13 November 8, 2026

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Every three years the Christian Year ends with three weeks of parables from Matthew's 25th chapter—this is one of those years. Each of these parables were recorded in Matthew's apocalyptic section of his gospel. Apocalyptic literature in the Bible are passages creatively written—I say creatively written—because the Greek word *apokalypsis* means to "reveal" or "uncover." Apocalyptic literature used code language, poetry, or symbolic images to speak to a hidden truth. And the truth apocalyptic literature in biblical times was usually trying to uncover was about the end of the world.

The book of Revelation is the only New Testament book totally devoted to an apocalyptic message. But there are sections in other books of the New Testament, like our passage today, that were apocalyptic.

When we—persons in Christian churches—think of the end of the world stuff, we might picture evangelical or very conservative congregations. Liberal churches like Myers Park usually think end-of-the-world type of stuff as being fanciful, not real, material, because we imagine that it's all about God ending the world and Jesus returning from heaven and a whole lot of other stuff that we don't believe. But there's lots of end-of-the-world scenarios.

The Baby Boomers brought an end of the world to US American society as it had been known through the 1940s. The year 1492 brought the beginning of the end to indigenous societies of the Caribbean and Central and South America as Christopher Columbus began discovering this hemisphere for European nations. The world as native peoples knew it in those areas began ending in 1492. And a century later, the world began ending for native peoples in North America. And since we are all mortal, the end of the world comes to each one of us, individually. So, we don't have to believe in the Rapture, or in the *Left Behind* book series, or in evangelical scare tactics about God, to learn some things about life in the three parables that end the Christian Year once every three years.

So, what was Jesus trying to tell us in this strange little parable?

One of my favorite movies is the *Shawshank Redemption*, based on the Stephen King novel of the same name. Many of you may have seen it. Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman are two of the prominent actors in the film. In the movie, Andy Dufresne, played by Robbins, is wrongfully convicted of murdering his wife—by that I mean he didn't do it—and sent to prison for life. Most of the movie is about his life in prison. Near the end of the movie Andy is threatened by the warden and fears for his life. He meets his friend, Red, played by Morgan Freeman, and begins a conversation.

Andy starts by saying, "My wife used to say I was a hard man to know. I loved her, I just didn't know how to show it. I killed her, Red. I didn't pull the trigger, but I drove her away and that's why she died."

Red responded, "That don't make you a murderer. A bad husband, maybe. Feel bad about it, if you want to, but you didn't pull the trigger."

"No, I didn't," Andy follows. "Somebody else did, but I ended up in here. Bad luck, I guess. It floats around. It's got to land on somebody. It was my turn, I guess. **I was in the path of the tornado.** I just didn't expect the storm to last as long as it has. . . I didn't shoot my wife. **Whatever mistakes I've made, I've paid for them and then some."**

Andy then dreams about where he would go if he ever gets out of prison—Zihuatanejo, Mexico, a beach on the pacific. He told Red that the Mexicans say the Pacific has no memory. He wants to live the rest of his life in a warm place that has no memory. Red tells him to stop doing this to himself. "These are just pipe dreams. Mexico is way down there and you're in here, and that's the way it is."

"Right," Andy agrees. "That's the way it is. It's down there and I'm in here. I guess it comes down to a simple choice really. **Get busy living or get busy dying**."

Get busy living or get busy dying. It's a phrase that shifts the movie. That night in the story Andy breaks out of prison.

I'm captured by the idea in the movie that **Andy had been in the path of a bad luck tornado**. "It's got to land on somebody," he says. "It was my turn, I guess." But he didn't expect the storm to last as long as it did.

End-of-the-world moments might feel like being in the path of a tornado. Moments that change your life forever. A cancer diagnosis. The unexpected death of a loved one. Or something larger than you. 9/11 and then your response to it—signing up for the military, for instance, or changing your career to become a firefighter. Or COVID and your response to that—anger about being shut down and responding with online vitriol or deciding to serve others worse off than you; taking food to the elderly, who were most vulnerable to the disease, leading Zoom groups to stay in touch with people.

In Jesus' parable, the moment when the groom arrives for the wedding party is unknown. Now, I should mention that in some ancient manuscripts verse 1 says "bridegroom and bride." My NRSV has a footnote mentioning that fact. You may want to check your Bible. The bridesmaids are waiting for the newlywed couple to arrive so that the wedding banquet can start. **The only question is will the bridesmaids be ready when they arrive.**

Life comes to us like that. All those examples I just mentioned—cancer diagnosis, unexpected death of a loved one, 9/11, COVID—all in one sense or another the path of a tornado. Think of your own example. **These moments roll through life, hitting one house, but missing another, hit and miss, hit and miss.**

When those moments miss us, we tend to overlook them, pretend that we are immune. We may imagine we were prepared, when maybe we were just lucky.

I have a confession to make. I don't like this parable, and I wonder if Jesus really said it. As you probably realize, Jesus didn't write the gospels. Everything we have of Jesus' teachings are Mark and Matthew and Luke and John's version of what Jesus taught. And there are examples of how Matthew took a parable of grace that Jesus taught and made it into a parable of judgment. The most egregious was the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, where in Luke as well as in the Gospel of Thomas—which didn't make it into the New Testament—ended the parable with a house full of the poor, and the blind, and the lame all enjoying a great wedding feast. But then in Matthew's version he has the host walk through the party and kick out people who didn't have on proper "wedding clothes" and a parable of grace became a parable of judgment.

Matthew did the same thing when he turned Mark's Parable of the Growing Wheat into the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds. I think Matthew did it again. Unfortunately, we don't have another version of this parable in scripture. It only exists in Matthew

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What are the clues that Matthew may have changed the parable?

The silly bridesmaids are left out of the party, making it a parable of judgment, making it suspect. They didn't have enough oil for their lamps, or in our retelling of the story, didn't have backup chargers for their phones. Matthew ends the story with a proverb, **"Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." This is the first clue.**

Matthew's little addition doesn't fit the parable. All the smart bridesmaids got drowsy and fell asleep, but when they were awakened by the announcement that the groom and bride were arriving, they trimmed their lamps, lighting up the area. They fell asleep, but they had been prepared. Keep awake cannot be the moral of the story.

Another way to imagine the moral of the story is that we are supposed to be prepared. The smart bridesmaids were prepared with battery packs to charge their phones, or extra oil for their lamps. But is that really why they entered the party while the silly bridesmaids missed the party? I don't think so. **This is the second clue that Matthew changed the story.**

The silly ones went off to buy more oil, or get their phones charged. Their lack of preparation did not directly cause them to miss the party. They missed the party because they panicked. Had they stayed with the smart bridesmaids, even if their phones went dead, they still could have read the text thread sent to all 10 bridesmaids on their smart friends' phones. And the flashlight on the smart bridesmaids phones would have been bright enough for all 10 of them to see when the wedded couple arrived and walk them into the house for the party.

They missed the party because they panicked and ran off to get their phones charged.

When the apocalypse arrives, don't panic. To me, that's the moral of the story.

When my doctor told me a few years ago that I had cancer, it felt in my gut like an end-of-the-world, apocalyptic moment. Thankfully, I'm cancer free today. So, if you ask me a lot of questions about those days, my response is probably going to be: "Cancer? I don't have cancer." But one thing I will say is that I took my time exploring treatments and tried not to be reactive. Tried not to panic. To the point that my young adult kids were asking my wife if I was being reckless—taking too much time while the cancer was growing.

I know a number of people who have asked, "Why me?" when they were told they had cancer. That wasn't my question. Mine was: "Why not me?" I'm not any better than anyone else. I grew up in industrial West Virginia—**who knows how many chemicals I drank in the water or breathed in the air when I was growing up.**

One of the jobs I had in high school was at a hot dog stand—the kind where you drove up, parked your car, rolled down your window and after ordering I would bring you a tray to hang on your window and all the hot dogs and BBQ sandwiches you wanted to eat and all the Root Beer you could drink. It was next door to a chemical dye factory. Every now and then the factory next door would have an exhaust of dye gases and a blue fog would settle down upon us. Back then in the 70s, you just kept on working. I'd pull my T-shirt over my nose and I'd have these blue circles at the top of my T-shirt where my nose had been breathing the air through my shirt. **That probably wasn't good for me.** I don't think my T-shirt was equivalent to an N-95 mask. So, cancer? Why not me?

When you are in the path of a tornado you need to act quickly, but not hurriedly. You want to respond decisively, but not hastily. **Don't panic. Clear-headed thinking is essential.**

And clear-headed thinking doesn't usually happen on the spot. It's created by thinking about things ahead of time. The time to start thinking about your mortality is not the moment your doctor tells you, you have cancer. It's now, when you are healthy and have so much to look forward to in life. Start talking now, start thinking now, about your mortality, so that when you have to face it, you will have done some groundwork.

If you are a parent or grandparent, start thinking about how you would handle things if your child or grandchild would tell you she's pregnant, or has a drug problem. If you think, "those things would never happen to her," I hate to tell you, but you are probably setting yourself up for a panic attack. **Say with me: "Why not me?"**

I think the parable is telling us to be prepared mentally, spiritually for the apocalypse—for whatever apocalypses can turn your world upside down—so that we don't panic and run off somewhere and miss our moment of opportunity. Some Republicans may be thinking that the apocalypse arrived Tuesday night. Some Democrats felt that way two years ago. But they found ways to survive and thrive.

"Get busy living or get busy dying," Andy Dufresne said to his friend Red when he thought about living too long in the path of a tornado.

One thing I liked about the way we planted and recognized the serviceberry bush and prissimon trees last month for Indigenous people's day is that we said we are going to honor the Catawba people who still live in our area. Native American tribes didn't disappear off the face of the Earth, though our nation has tried to act as if that is the case.

I'd like to know how Deb Haaland's ancestors survived the wave of white people who overran her tribe's land over a century ago. I don't know how they did it, I just know that she did. This past Tuesday she was elected governor of New Mexico, the first Native American governor in US history.

When I read books and stories about the Middle Passage or memoirs of slaves who survived American slavery, or when I read books and stories about Jewish persons that lived through the Holocaust, I'm amazed that anyone survived, and yet, thousands of people did. And the ancestors of slaves and of the Holocaust are living proof.

When the apocalypse arrives get busy living or get busy dying. If you are going to survive in some shape or form, you've got to figure out what you are living for. Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, said that the people who survived the Holocaust usually had some deep-seated reason to keep on living, to keep on enduring the horrific existence in a Nazi Death Camp.

Scripture is full of such stories. When the Babylonian army had surrounded Jerusalem and the fate of the city had all but been sealed, God told Jeremiah to go buy some farmland outside the city walls—land the Babylonians had already taken for themselves. It was a foolish investment and yet, it was also an outlandish message of hope.

Here's my reimagining of this parable of judgment into a parable of grace. When the silly bridesmaids ask smart bridesmaids for their battery chargers and the smart bridesmaids refuse, the silly ones say, "Then, we'll go to the 24-hour WalMart and buy some battery chargers," but the smart ones say, "No, we must not split up. Stay here with us. When we receive a text message from the bride or groom, we will show you the text message. And when they arrive and we turn the lights on our phones, you can stand close to us, there will be enough light. So, the silly bridesmaids stay with the group and do not run away in a panic. When the bridegroom arrives, the light from the 5 smart bridesmaids is enough for all and everyone enters the wedding banquet."

When the apocalypse comes, don't panic, stick together, and see where the grace of God leads you. AMEN.