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Matthew 25:1-13  
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## **Boy, Do I Love a Good Nap!**

I read of this woman who said that she always wanted to be a bear. She said:

“If you’re a bear, you get to hibernate. You do nothing but sleep for half the year. I could deal with that.”

She said, “Before you hibernate, you’re supposed to eat yourself stupid. I could deal with that, too.”

She said, “If you’re a mama bear, everyone knows you mean business.

“You swat anyone who bothers your cubs. If your cubs get out of line, you swat them, too. I could deal with that.”

“And if you’re a bear, your mate EXPECTS you to wake up growling. He EXPECTS that you will have hairy legs and excess body fat.

“I wanna be a bear.”

I don’t know about you, but I really resonate with the hibernating part (okay, and the eating myself stupid part).

I love to sleep.

And while I don’t always do it very well, it feels so good after a long day to curl up in my bed cool on the outside and warm on the inside.

Especially when I get to snuggle with my wife.

And if I ever wanted a role model – it's the Black Bear. The Black Bear is the Poster Child for good effective sleep.

Recent research is beginning to unpack the amazing slumber skills of these animals.

Get this: They hibernate for up to four months during the winter, without ever waking up to eat, drink, relieve themselves, or exercise.

I have to get up two to four times every night! (I know ... TMI – too much information!)

And while the catatonic inactivity of hibernating bears may drop their heart rate to as low as six beats per minute, they still burn an amazing 4,000 calories per day!

Now that's my kind of sleep!

But what is truly amazing about these bears is the ability to emerge from hibernation at *almost the same level of physical strength and stamina* as when they started their season-skipping siesta.

Through daily regimens of muscle stimulation and contraction, while they sleep, bears are able to both maintain their constant body temperature and keep their massive muscles in working shape.

Contrast that with a person who is sick and bedridden for two months - his muscles will have become listless from passivity.

Or take a Aaron Rogers or a Tom Brady, all-star pro quarterbacks, and ask them to execute with the same precision and ability at training camp in July as they do in the playoffs in January.

No way.

But hibernating bears? Their spell of complete inactivity is offset by the amazing ability to efficiently maintain their strength.

So, come spring, they bound out of their den at full speed ready to eat about anything in sight. Four months off and good as new.

Now researchers are hoping to learn the science behind the regenerating-while-napping black bear, hoping to apply their findings to the bedridden or to those with degenerative neuromuscular diseases.

But while the deep sleep of hibernation is great for bears, and may one day impact medical therapy, not all slumber is equally beneficial.

As we heard in our Gospel text for this morning, *Fall asleep on Jesus, and you may not emerge feeling so rested and refreshed.*

When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he used parables with illustrations from everyday life to make his point.

In this morning's text, he tells the story of 10 virgins who have been selected as bridesmaids to a wedding.

But the groom is running late, and so they all nod off for a while ... a little slumber before the wedding feast.

Then, all of a sudden, here comes the Bridegroom. Five are ready to go and five are not. Kind of a weird story.

To help it make sense, I think, it's useful to have some historical background of a first-century Jewish wedding.

Dang – with THREE girls and only ONE boy ... I should have been Jewish!

In Middle-Eastern culture the bridegroom is often a more important figure than the bride, and frequently paid for all the expenses of the wedding.

A Jewish wedding had three parts or stages to it.

First, there was the formal engagement/betrothal which was almost always arranged by the parents of the future bride and groom.

Later (often up to a year or more, believe it or not) came the formal religious ceremony in the bride's home.

This was a religious service, similar to our wedding ceremony.

And then finally, there was the wedding banquet (a feast really), generally at night, at the house of the groom.

And get this, it could last up to seven days.

Can you imagine?

Paying for Danielle's wedding almost bankrupted me – and it was only one afternoon and evening – imagine paying for a party that lasted seven days!

And this feast could take place right after the ceremony or weeks later.

The uncertainty was considered a part of the excitement. The bridegroom would come to get his bride and they would walk together to the wedding.

It was an elaborate affair.

And it was, therefore, a social event to which their friends were anxious to attend.

The bride and the groom would walk down the street and their bridesmaids would take part in the “welcoming ceremony” by lighting the way with lamps held by the wedding party.

It would be a major faux-pax for anyone in the wedding party not to be by the road ready to welcome the bridegroom and bride.

So, here we have ten virgins all sound asleep.

Obviously, the issue isn't that they fell asleep – both the wise and the foolish slept.

The issue is *that only five woke up prepared and ready to go* in the middle of the night.

Jesus is warning against bad kingdom catnaps; hibernating without remaining strong and ready to go.

So, what are the lessons for those of us drowsy today?

First, since this is a parable, it is helpful to figure out what each element represents.

The bridesmaids (the 10 virgins) are the church (us) that are waiting for the Second Coming.

The bridegroom is Christ.

The wedding feast is the great and joyous occasion – the feast Christ has prepared for each of us.

And, the delay of the bridegroom, corresponds to the delay of the Second Coming that the church at that time had experienced (remember they all expected it to happen in their lifetime).

And, finally, the bridegroom's arrival in the dark of night is the Second Coming itself.

As Christians living 2,000 years after the *first* coming of Christ, it is all too easy to forget that his *second* coming is still going to happen.

And so, we get complacent. We aren't vigilant. We aren't alert.

Jesus is warning us against not being ready when he comes.

Five of the virgins were un-bear like.

They emerged from their hibernation and they weren't prepared for the advent of the bridegroom.

They had to run off to the market to buy oil in order to prepare their lamps for meeting him.

So how prepared are we for the coming of the Lord? Can we awake during this delay, prepared to meet him, or must we still scramble to get pretty and party-worthy?

In the little book, *Laughter in Appalachia*, Fred Park of Berea, Kentucky tells a story about a man named Quill.

Quill lived way back in the woods where he hunted and fished all the time.

Quill didn't pay any attention to the hunting seasons or laws or anything, and he knew the woods better than the game warden.

The game warden had been trying to catch Quill for a long time.

And today was the day. He knew Quill would be up early to go fishing.

So, the game warden snuck down there in the middle of the night and hid on top of Quill's house.

This way he knew he had the jump on Quill. He'd let him head out and then he'd follow him.

His plan was to hide in the woods until Quill had caught a large, illegal bunch of fish, and then Quill would be busted.

As it started to get a little bit of daylight, the game warden could hear Quill get up, start a fire, and put the coffee on.

His stomach started growling at the smell of that coffee and those fresh smelling biscuits as they baked in the oven.

He could hardly contain himself.

Suddenly out walked Quill on the porch and hollered, "Come on down here and git some of this coffee and biscuits while they're hot! I know you're out there!"

Then he went back in and shut the door.

The game warden could not believe it.

He climbed down and walked up on the porch and into the house and exclaimed:

"Well, how in the heck did you know I was out there?"

Quill replied, "I didn't. I just walk out here every morning and say that ... just in case you are!"

Quill may not have been a genius, but he knew enough to take precautions. He was ready! Every day!

And we need to live each day as if Christ was coming today.

To do so, we've got to keep our lamps trimmed. Putting our spiritual lives in order is not something to be put off till a later day.

The day to be ready for the bridegroom is today and not tomorrow.

So, what is the oil we are short of? How might we scramble around to get ready for confronting Christ today?

Oil in Scripture is often a symbol for the Holy Spirit.

Do you ever make a decision without first listening to the Spirit, who is there to guide and direct us?

Or perhaps we're short of the oil of kindness and compassion.



There's no way we're ready to meet Jesus, who often comes to us in the person of the unloved and unfortunate, if we are lacking the essential oils of compassion and mercy.

Maybe we're short of the oil of patience and long-suffering.

Without such oil, we're ill-equipped to deal with Jesus, who may come to us in the form of a person who needs long-term love, extensive patience, and guidance.

Perhaps we're short of the oil of stewardship – a sharing of our resources.

Without such oil, we end up focusing more on our own desires and less on other's needs – and in so doing cripple the church's and our own ability to make a difference in the world.

And in so doing, we miss Jesus entirely.

To be prepared for the party, we're to trim our lamps daily.

Did you notice that it is all about being prepared to meet Jesus – today?

If that is so, am I saying that Jesus has already returned?

I'll admit, there have been no apocalyptic fireworks, no trumpets sounding, no clouds parting.

No pileups on the freeways. No airplanes tumbling out of the skies. None of that.

But here's the deal: Jesus is already here.

It's possible we were so asleep that we didn't notice, and if we were awake, our lamps were so dim that we couldn't see him.

Jesus is here today. Jesus was here yesterday. And Jesus is going to be here tomorrow.

We find him in the prisons, along the highways, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, at the food bank, in the soup kitchen, at the office, in the hospital ...

Jesus is found in the faces of those we meet every day.

What would our world be like if, our lamps were full enough and the oil burning bright enough, that we really could see Jesus in all those we came into contact with?

And, if we treated one another accordingly?

Jesus is here. I promise.

Finally, we must remember what we are preparing for. It is a wedding banquet. A party. Not something woeful.

And this reality should speak to our motivation in the spiritual life.

When the busy week is over and we are getting ready to go to a party at a friend's house, that is a good thing.

It is fun anticipation. There is no motivation of panic or obligation or wariness.

We look forward to the community of friends we will be with and we anticipate the festivities that we are getting ready for.

Jesus didn't tell the parable of 10 virgins preparing for an IRS tax audit.

It was a wedding banquet. It was a PARTY.

And the party Jesus calls us to is worth getting ready for ... it will be a banquet of unending satisfaction.

What do you need to do to make sure you don't run out of oil?

To make sure when you awake you are prepared? So, you can see Jesus...

We can take a lesson from the black bear:

Always wake up prepared to go.

And then realize that the party is worth the anticipation. And the groom is worth the preparation.

May our lamps always stay full and our lights forever shine bright!

*Amen.*