

November 8, 2020 | 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

[WIS 6:12-16](#)

[PS 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8](#)

[1 THES 4:13-18 OR 4:13-14](#)

[MT 25:1-13](#)

By Ralph McCloud

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and A-burning or How Much Oil Do You Have?

Keep your lamp trimmed and a-burning

Keep your lamp trimmed and a-burning

Keep your lamp trimmed and a-burning

Oh, See what the Lord has done

[*Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning*](#) is a popular traditional African American Gospel song. Historically, it has been a way of helping folk to understand the Gospel of the five wise virgins, the five foolish ones, and the wisdom and importance of preparation. The song encourages us, as today's Gospel does, to be ready and prepared when the bridegroom returns.

Many African American elders, my parents included, would use the song to teach us to be prepared for tomorrow and whatever is on the horizon. They would remind us that we needed to be twice as good to get half as far and to save one dollar for every three spent. But more significantly, they encouraged us to be prepared to be light and to use that bright light for future generations. Because of the times, they did not experience much light following slavery during the Jim Crow era and through the civil rights era. They would use the song among many others to anticipate better days if we just prepared.

Similarly, they reminded us that we know not the time nor the hour and to prepare for that day when the ultimate *bridegroom* comes. They wanted us to be sure that we were the ones who would provide light and share light, all the while acknowledging that darkness is sometimes inevitable. They would often quote the scripture, "weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5)." The elders would stress preparation, anticipation, and participation to be ready for what we would face on this earth, and ultimately to be prepared for what awaits us in the afterlife.

"Blind" Willie Johnson is credited with writing and recording *Keep You Lamps Trimmed and Burning* around 1928. Willie became blind in mid-life and died in his 40's. Life and times were difficult for the entire world then, not just African Americans. A deadly pandemic and a crippling financial depression gripped the earth, so writing and recording a song about being prepared may have seemed foolhardy.

I cannot help but observe similarities between those 1928 times and these 2020 times. Racial reckoning, millions dying from oppressive disease, political and social polarization, brutal

unemployment, and escalating poverty. It seems that in 2020 we were not prepared for what we are living through now. The confluence of many of these issues seems to land with the murder of George Floyd, a person who had brushes with a criminal justice system that ultimately took his life and a person in poverty who was also infected with the coronavirus. While not everyone has been infected with the virus, everyone has been affected by it. Like Mr. Floyd and millions of others, this year has been a stark reminder that not only our lamp wicks are not trimmed, but also that we have been content being without lamp oil for quite some time. It seems that we have been more like the foolish yet complacent virgins who really did not prepare for their day.

Don't the struggles we now face reflect the ways we just have not prepared, planned, or taken seriously the fact that a wedding, a banquet has been scheduled? We ignored high unemployment and poverty in our urban areas. We dismissed the fact that pre-existing health care disparities led to unprecedented deadly results. We somehow forgot that structural racism is still a thing and that our brothers and sisters are still treated poorly because of the way God created us.

Jesus teaches through this parable that the wise and prepared will get to enjoy what has been prepared for them. Americans are "preparing" for the seasons of giving and Thanksgiving, but also preparing to start afresh with a new year. As we approach these times, can we ask ourselves:

Are we ready?

Are our lamps trimmed and burning?

Do we have enough oil to keep them lit to illuminate bright days for ourselves and others?

Are we prepared for whatever difficulty that awaits us by making sure our brothers and sisters are healthy, whole, respected and living in dignity?

Our survival depends on it.

Our survival depends on us.

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