

**Sermon: History's Point**  
**Scripture: Matthew 15:1-13**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: November 12, 2023**

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Do you believe that history has a point? That history is going somewhere? Or is it all just random events of happenstance that'll end sometime when the earth peters out or we destroy it ourselves? Laurie, Bill, Fred and I grappled with that question during our 2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday of the month Bible study this past week – which you are always welcome to join by the way – and we figured it out and determined the meaning of life. And the answer is... ok, well, we didn't come to a consensus about it but feel free to ask Fred, Bill, or Laurie their take on whether history has a point cause I'm about to give you mine...or at least as your pastor I'll offer you something of the company line about it.

So first of all, the whole concept of history derives from Judaism. The Jewish Bible changed history by literally creating history because up until that time the religions of the world viewed the world in cyclical terms, as a Great Wheel where no event was unique but every event had been enacted, is enacted and will be enacted perpetually and individual actors are the same at every turn of the circle. Judaism alone stepped out of that worldview and suggested that events actually move forward rather than repeating themselves and as a result the future can be influenced. It was a radical and transformative idea for human consciousness and changed everything.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Prager's article "Cahill's Gift" on Catholic Resources Education Center's website

So like other world religions Judaism had a creation story or myth but for Judaism the creation story was the beginning, then there was the middle of the story that the people writing and listening and we ourselves participate in and then there will be a culmination of the story. The main protagonist of this story was of course Yahweh, God, who created and sustained the world and structured it morally so there was a right way to live in it and a wrong way. And then God curtailed God's own power to give freedom to the human beings to be in relationship with God and God's world, to choose right and eschew wrong which didn't work out all that well but regardless the end point according to both the Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible was when finally God's purposes of a just and beautiful world would be consummated, realized, achieved, and history at that point fulfilled.

So the Judeo-Christian answer to the question "does history have a point" is an unequivocal yes! I mean of course you are welcome to answer that question for yourself and decide that it's all just random happenstance with no point and we'll all just fade away into oblivion but know you're deciding against the teaching of the best selling wisdom book of all time - the Bible - and 100's of millions of people across the ages, who disagree with you... but that's fine, you are free to believe what you believe.

So what does this have to do with the parable of the 10 Virgins that Jesus tells his disciples? And what does all this and the parable have to do with our lives today in 21st century America? We begin by going back in history to when the parable was told by Jesus and written down by Matthew the gospel writer and then try and learn something for today from it - thank you Judaism for making that possible for our brains to do!

So between the years 200BCE and 200CE, for about 400 years there surfaced in Judaism in the ancient Mediterranean world a particularly prominent perspective that the Messianic Age that had been spoken of for many hundreds if not thousands of years before was reaching its climax and the end was nigh. The belief was that the “unveiling” or the “great disclosure” or “revelation” was going to take place, those words translated in Greek as “apocalypsis”. It came from centuries of Jewish thinking and Jewish writing about the culmination point of history where there would be such things that you’ve heard about: the Messiah would come, the resurrection of the dead would take place, a great battle of good against evil would commence, the Jews would return to Jerusalem and the Holy Lands, a final judgment would take place and the evil punished and the good redeemed, and a new creation would be inaugurated, call it Zion, call it the Kingdom of God, call it heaven on earth. This was all in Jewish thought and theology and expectation over the course of those 400 years in particular and right smack in the middle of those 400 years came Jesus of Nazareth, which is why all those ideas and terms and notions are familiar to us non-Jewish people because they were a part of Jesus’ story and the gospel writings and Paul’s letters to the early churches. Apocalypse and eschatology or claims about the “end times” was part of the air that Jesus breathed and it all came to bear upon his teachings as well. It’s there every Sunday in our own prayer that Jesus taught us - “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” is a call for the great revelation, the apocalypse, and the end point of history.

You’ll notice as we approach Advent, the season where we prepare for and await Christ’s coming at Christmas - we are 3 weeks away from Advent believe it or not! - we begin to hear the distant beating drum of the end times in scripture,

in Jesus' words, and that's what the parable of the 10 virgins or the 10 bridesmaids is about. For centuries the Jewish people have had in their worldview this belief that eventually God, the maker of the world and the destination of history was going to finally act decisively in the world to bring about the end times when the righteous would be saved and the unrighteous destroyed, Jerusalem restored and a new age inaugurated. So waiting for this was a thing. And the sense that the redeeming of the world was delayed was a thing. And wondering and debating about when it would all culminate was a big thing. And thinking about HOW the Jewish people and their leaders were waiting, faithfully or not, was a really big thing.

So Jesus told a number of parables that seemed to suggest the religious leaders, the Scribes and Pharisees, were not waiting appropriately or prepared for the coming of the Messiah. The parable of the Vineyard Workers who took over the vineyard in the owners absence. The parable of the talents and while the master was gone some invested the money and were rewarded in the end but one hid the money out of fear and was punished. And now the 10 Virgins were also awaiting the Bridegroom and some were prepared and some were caught unprepared and unaware and were left out of the big celebration of the wedding.

I have to say, it is a tough parable and there's a lot not to like in it. Why weren't the 5 bridesmaids who had enough oil willing to share with those who didn't have enough? Why was it their fault when it was the bridegroom who was late? The last line of the parable, the exhortation from Jesus is "stay awake cause you do not know when the bridegroom comes" and if you go back in the parable you realize all 10 of them fell asleep. So there's a lot to wonder about in this parable and a lot not to like, but Jesus is notorious for telling parables that are

hard to like. Even his most beautiful and moving ones have this edge where you can't quite shake the fact that you identify with the creep in the story - the resentful older brother in the Prodigal Son or the guys who passed by the wounded person in the Good Samaritan. Know what I mean? Jesus doesn't seem to mind at all making us uncomfortable with his stories and in fact that sure seems to be at least part of his point, to make us uncomfortable.

So ok, good work Jesus, the religious leaders are definitely uncomfortable, to the point of being irate, at these parables, the disciples are wondering where they fit into the parables - are they the wise bridesmaids or the foolish ones?? - and we ourselves 2000 years later as the end times still has not arrived we ourselves wonder if in the meantime we are living as we should here in the middle of history. Whether we have a strong eschatology or not - belief in the end of time - we all believe I would think that there is an end of OUR time when we will die and the question that can be an uncomfortable one, is are we living with lamps trimmed and paying attention and what would we do differently if we knew the bridegroom, or the wedding party, the end of our days, was around the corner?

But I don't want to too quickly jump out of the frying pan of the apocalyptic thinking that this parable is centered on cause it's really not inviting to think about our individual deaths and whether we are prepared for those or not. It really is proposing that history has a point and its point is a final wedding-type celebration and feast in God's kingdom come. And less you think that such theology and perspective on history's point is some archaic ancient mediterranean historical viewpoint, let me tell you it is very alive and well in Christian circles today. You must know this, right? You can read about it in the

NYTimes over these last couple of weeks because what is happening in Israel and Palestine right now and what certain influential politicians and impactful political organizations believe that is impacting what is happening there is an apocalyptic worldview which says that the Jews must return to Israel and claim that land as their own and all Jerusalem and that moment will in fact signal the final battle, the great apocalypse, the Second Coming of Christ, the final judgment and the end times where the righteous will be saved and the unrighteous destroyed and damned.

We can dismiss it as conspiracy-theory-craziness and radical religious extremism but it's more prominent than that and honestly, we should consider squarely that Jesus Christ himself, our Great Teacher and Savior, in the gospels speaks of the culmination of history in certain ways that seem to point to the coming time of judgment and references times of great violence as a precursor to the end times. So asking what we do with that and where we go with it is not unreasonable. And unfortunately for you I'm not sure I have any answers for you but I repeat one thing that one of our Bible Study participants said that either what's happening over there is signaling the end times and the apocalypse or it's another tragic moment in history that will pass on and off to other moments and things will keep going along as they are and that they were putting their money on the latter, that things will keep marching along as they have. Fair enough. But what if, what if this time around the end is arriving. What would you do differently with your life right now? If history is reaching its point here what would you need to do to get right with God and with one another? Is there something you have been putting off doing that knowledge of the world ending would inspire you to address? Where are you with what Jesus asks of us in this

world as our example and teacher and savior? If the point of history is the fulfillment of all that is good and right, God's dream of justice and righteousness for all the earth, how's your life contributing to that? Pretty well? Not much? Could be better?

Terry Tempest Williams is a Native American writer who poses this in a good way. She says "The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint, that we might leave room for the life that is destined to come." That is the heart of how notions of apocalypse should impact us and move our lives that we may live now with a consciousness of the life that is destined to come. Amen.