

Today's scripture speaks to both carrying Christ's light at all times and to being prepared to meet Jesus. Let me give you some background that will be helpful to you in understanding this passage. In the Jewish culture of Biblical times, the groom would come to the bride's home where he'd pay a price to the bride's father. Then, the groom would go back home and prepare a place for his wife in his father's house. Only then would the groom come again (at an undetermined time). When word came that he was on his way, the bridesmaids would go out to greet him, and together, they'd parade back to the bride. Then there would be the wedding and feast that could last a week.

Today, we'll have a party for any occasion: birthdays for people—and pets, anniversaries, gender reveals, you name it! This was not the case in Biblical times when most of the early Christians would have been living at the poverty level. A wedding feast was something extremely special.

We're given the bridegroom metaphor for Jesus. The wedding feast is Heaven. We know that the church is the bride of Christ. Friends, we're the bridesmaids.

In the story, ten bridesmaids appear to be ready, but they're separated into wise and foolish. It's not that the wise ones stay awake all night, while the foolish ones sleep soundly. They all fall asleep. The difference is that the wise bridesmaids have oil—fuel--for their lamps.

Jesus is the light of the world. And the wise people, the ones who were let into the wedding celebration, or heaven, are the ones who carry the oil so that they can shine that light.

They were prepared. Even though when they began waiting for the groom it was the middle of the day and the sun was shining brightly, they brought extra oil. The foolish bridesmaids didn't think of it at all. Or they figured they had plenty of time to get more once they got word that the groom was coming. It's like those of us who figure we can run over to Hannaford stock up on supplies when the snow starts...only those who went when the storm was first forecast cleared out all the bread and milk.

I don't know about you, but I sigh in relief once bathing suit season is over. I figure I have until about now to get going on an exercise program. But if climate change brings an 80 degree day in the next few weeks, I won't be ready. All those folks who started the exercise program in October will be at the beach. I will have run out of time.

One of the lessons here is that we're each accountable for our preparation. Another is that it's important to have that oil (after all, that's what either gets you in—or keeps you out—of the banquet). Oil is something that is very common, yet very precious. Not everyone realizes the true value of it.

What is oil used for? Cooking (helping to bring things from raw to cooked or transforming their states), used for heat (warmth), used for light (lamps), used for cleaning cuts, used for shining things (lemon oil), used for protection (acting as a barrier to dirt), WD-40 takes the squeak out of hinges, oil is used to preserve food (cover in oil) and skin (Oil of Olay). Plus, crude oil is used to fuel planes, trains, and automobiles, oil is also used for anointing (ritual act to confer a holy office).

Could it be that the oil is faith? It brings warmth. It lights the path. It helps with self-preservation. It helps get us 'unstuck'. It fuels us and it helps us to bring light and warmth to others when they are depleted.

In your program this morning, you'll see an offering envelope for funds going to an interdenominational effort called "One Great Hour of Sharing". This initiative helps to bring God's hope to people in crisis, including those impacted by disasters, both nationally and internationally. One of the ministries One Great Hour of Sharing supports is UCC Disaster Ministries. As a former Conference Disaster Coordinator, I can share that the UCC

focuses on preparation and long-term recovery. Preparation can save lives and mitigate the impact of disasters. During the seven years I was with Disaster Ministries in Massachusetts, we responded to hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, flooding, blizzards, gas explosions; as well as suicides, overdoses, and tragic accidents. Some of our efforts were made possible by funding through One Great Hour of Sharing. When churches and communities are prepared, they have access to more tools and more support-- and that may well make them more resilient. I encourage you to donate to this ministry. If you're not prepared to do so today, feel free to take the envelope with you and return it to the church by next Sunday.

Preparation matters. Wise Mainers know to keep the shovel handy, no matter if it's the end of March. Wise Christians know to stay fueled up on faith, for in being prepared, we'll be able to shine Christ's light until the Light of the world comes again! Blessed be and amen.