

Sunday, November 9, 2014: Matthew 25:1-13

## **I understand the story better now than when I was I kid, but I still have the feeling that the foolish virgins were framed.**

by [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [October 29, 2014](#) issue

Going home can be rough. My hometown is Flint, Michigan, a city about 70 miles north of Detroit that was immortalized in Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*. That 1989 documentary showed people how Flint fared as the auto industry, the main industry in Flint, started contracting in the '80s.

People used to ask me if things in Flint were really that bad. I would say that things were tough but not as bad as the disaster Moore describes. Now I would say that things are far worse.

What's happening in Flint mirrors what's going on in Detroit, just on a smaller scale. Driving around town with my husband, Daniel, is always eye-opening. Well-kept homes have been abandoned, the siding and copper taken out. I see what my hometown has become, and it tears my heart. Daniel, who grew up in rural North Dakota, is stunned to see the decay.

In 1970, a year after I was born, Flint had a population of nearly 200,000. General Motors employed 80,000 in plants throughout the city. This year, the population is just under 100,000, and about 4,000 people work for GM. Factories that once produced cars and spark plugs have been torn down, leaving just concrete slabs.

The decline of the auto industry didn't happen overnight. It happened over three decades, a layoff here and a layoff there. City leaders and citizens knew this was happening, but no substantial change took place. There was no planning for the day when GM wouldn't be around. I don't say this to blame people. But my fellow Flintoids and I were whistling past the graveyard, ignoring the warning signs, because we didn't know how to prepare for the demise of our only industry.

As a kid, I never did like the parable of the foolish virgins. I thought the wise virgins were selfish for not sharing. I understand the story better now, but there is still a residual feeling that the foolish virgins were framed.

Matthew 25 is filled with stories about the end of time and about being prepared for that great day. It begins with this tale of ten virgins going to a wedding—half of whom didn't plan ahead. Just like my hometown wasn't prepared for the massive loss of its main employer, the foolish virgins didn't prepare for the late arrival of the groom. They weren't present.

Jesus asks his listeners whether, at the end of time, they will be ready to meet their maker. He doesn't say when he will return. So we are called to be present in the here and now, to live as if Jesus' return will happen today. The wise virgins are present, aware of the time they live in. We are called to live as if the Lord's day is happening now—to tend to the sick, help the poor, and make disciples. We are to be like the wise virgins, carrying enough oil to wait for the groom's arrival.

We are called, that is, to be ready now, not just ready for that great day in the future. God can arrive in many ways in the here and now, in how we care for the stranger and for one another. We can easily miss God's arrival in our daily lives, and many of us have. We have been both the wise virgins and the foolish ones at one time or another.

Back in the 1950s in Minneapolis, there was an African-American Methodist congregation, Border Methodist, that was losing its home to urban renewal. A few blocks to the south was Hennepin Avenue Methodist, the big church in town, made up largely of people of European ancestry. (Disclosure: I work part-time for Hennepin.) Hennepin worked to formally invite the members of Border to become members of Hennepin. In the 1950s, the act of a white church reaching out to a primarily black church was an oddity. This simple act of welcoming was a big deal, with news media like the *New York Times* talking about this big step forward in civil rights.

At that moment, Hennepin's people were just being present. They were the virgins who had the extra oil, ready for God to show up not just at the end of time but at that particular time, nearly 60 years ago.

Are we ready? As the old spiritual goes, are our lamps "trimmed and burning"? The wise virgins were ready. So was Hennepin Avenue Methodist. Are we ready to meet

Jesus in the future at the end of time and also right now—especially when Jesus comes in the form of a poor single mother, a young gay man who feels like an outcast, or an executive who has everything and still feels empty?

My hometown is trying to reinvent itself. Downtown Flint is now a bustling place, especially since the local farmer's market moved in. They can't ignore the present anymore. May we learn to be ready for God showing up in the here and now.