

## Wake Up Calls

You can feel the tension building and almost hear the music reaching a fever pitch in the background. Since he rode in on a borrowed donkey in chapter 21, Jesus has made his way into the heart of Jerusalem and into the thick of a growing conflict with the religious leaders in the Temple. As you may recall, the gospel of Matthew is believed to have been written down around 80 AD, just a decade or so following destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire. The writer who composes this gospel is writing through the lens of an early church community who knows firsthand what urgency looks and feels like, how following this Jesus can cause division and put one in danger, how living the disciple life demands that one pay attention and be alert. In the passages that come between last week's and this morning's, Jesus openly critiques the power-happy religious elites and their love for all the trappings that come with that power—elaborate robes, the best seats at banquets, and gestures of reverence and respect as they make their way through the city streets. At one point Jesus declares, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and [cumin], and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to lament Jerusalem's disregard and abuse of prophets and to share his longing to shelter her children under his wing like a mother hen. He then speaks to the disciples privately about the coming persecution as he predicts the birth pangs that will usher in the coming of the Son of Man. He is also quick to insist that no one other than God the Father knows when this will happen, not even Jesus himself. “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”<sup>2</sup> [Read Matthew 25:1-13]

I've said it before: Parables like this one are not my favorites. I do not like the idea of a locked door anywhere in the kingdom of heaven, let alone a Savior bridegroom who keeps the door locked, who says he does not know the foolish ones who blow it. Because I blow it. I fall short on more days and in more ways than I can count. So early in the week as I read and studied and wrestled with this text, I could only picture that final

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:23, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 24: 44, NRSV

scene, the one where the door locks, and I am on the wrong side, with the bridegroom's "I do not know you" ringing in my ears. And then I went to bible study, and gathered with some of my most faithful knocker-ups.

Knocker-up (or knocker upper) is a new job title I learned this week. A friend shared a photo of a woman named Mary Smith. In the photo Ms. Smith is standing with one hand on her hip while the other hand holds what looks like a long straw. The caption says:

Mary Smith was a Knocker-up who earned sixpence a week shooting dried peas at sleeping workers windows. A Knocker-up's job was to rouse sleeping people so they could get to work on time, a profession that started in England and Ireland during the Industrial Revolution, before alarm clocks were affordable or reliable.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Mary Smith's job was to wake others up. She used a pea shooter. Others used long bamboo poles to tap on windows:

The knocker-up would not leave a client's window until they were sure that the client had been awoken.

A knocker upper would also use a 'snuffer outer' as a tool to rouse the sleeping. This implement was used to put out gas lamps which were lit at dusk and then needed to be extinguished at dawn.<sup>4</sup>

Apparently this job was featured on a television show about the worst jobs in history, but it would have been an important one. Workers who were dependent on making it to work on time and dependent on the income that work provided, were dependent on these knocker-ups to help them do what they needed to do.

We now live in the age of alarm clocks and alarm apps on our phones. My phone can ease me awake with gentle sounds or knock me out of bed with clanging cymbals. A friend recently commented that she had purchased an alarm clock with wheels for her son. This clever gadget takes off around the room when it is time to wake up. You have to chase it down to shut it off. So we now have ways to wake up that are completely independent of another human being, but I for one still need knocker-ups.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/StairnahEireann/photos/a.352621674852300/440293662751767/?type=3&theater>

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knocker-up>

As we sat around the table on Wednesday, we talked about the context when this passage was written. Bridesmaids (or maidens as they are called in some translations) were part of a longer and more complex celebration than the six who stood with me almost twenty-five years ago:

In ancient Palestinian weddings the marriage feast was at night; the bridegroom was met with lamps, and the bridegroom did delay coming for the bride.<sup>5</sup>

There were long negotiations around the betrothal, so a delay was to be expected, but this delay is absurdly long. In fact much about the story is absurd, and it is not to be taken literally, which is the rabbit trail my brain seemed to be stuck on. But our friends gathered at that table recognized that the story is not necessarily intended to be a depiction of what will happen when Christ returns; instead it is intended to serve as a reminder, a constant wake-up call to be alert, to be constant in attending to the things of the kingdom, to be awake to the things that keep God up at night.

So the story itself is a knocker-up, a poke or a prod, as is the latter part of Matthew's gospel really. You may have noticed that the closer we get to the cross, the more relentless Matthew grows, pushing us to understand just what exactly is at stake in this kingdom we pray for and claim to long for. Those who have received the invitation are called to play an active role in this kingdom that has already come near in Christ, this kingdom come—or coming—on earth. As several voices around the table noted on Wednesday, this parable is good news because it reminds us that the bridegroom has not yet come, that the door is not yet closed. Not one person in that room on Wednesday claimed to be among the five wise ones who had everything figured out, the ones who are completely ready for the bridegroom to arrive, but we took heart in that being a foolish bridesmaid does not have to be the last role we ever play in Christ's coming kingdom. The story is a wake-up call, a knocker-up to remind us that there is kingdom work yet to be done while we wait.

And so I find myself wondering what or who else is tapping on my window, calling me to open my eyes. This is not the gentle easy wake up of my iPhone. Instead it is the jarring of a poke or a prod, an uncomfortable realization, a knocker-up in the wee hours when I'd rather roll back over and catch a few more blissfully ignorant winks. There are the cries of children and families detained in tents along the border in Texas. There

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/10/bridesmaids-the-time-is-now-alyce-mckenzie-10-31-2011>

are men and women and children in Harrisburg living in inadequate housing. There are other beloved children of God who are still treated as second-class citizens because of the color of their skin, their disability, their income, or who they love. There are friends and relatives engulfed in crippling depression and fierce addiction. Left on my own, in my own little world I quickly grow enamored with the invitation in my hand, asleep with my eyes wide open, ignorant of the kingdom work right under my nose. And it is often my community that wakes me up. I cannot be faithful on my own. Not one of us can. Like those factory workers, I am dependent on the ones who wake me up. I need the prods and the pushes every day to hear what the Spirit is nudging me to do and be. And while it is true that I cannot borrow another's oil, preparedness, or faithfulness like a cup of sugar, that other can remind me where there is oil to be had and show me where there is still work to do while there is still time.

And so I give thanks for relentless Matthew, for faithful knocker-ups around the table in the library, on the streets in Harrisburg, in my morning headlines, and in the voices of those who push me to see all that I would rather not see. They make me uncomfortable because they open my eyes to things and perspectives I'd rather ignore or dodge. But through their holy persistence and prodding, I just might be awake and ready to welcome the coming King.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.