

If They Knew How Big God Is
Matthew 25:1-13; Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25; I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

[Jesus said to the disciples,] ¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout,

‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’

⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’

⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’

¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’

¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’

¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25

¹Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ²And Joshua said to all the people,

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many...

¹⁴“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.”

²¹And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!”

²²Then Joshua said to the people,

“You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.”

And they said, “We are witnesses.”

²³He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

²⁴The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.”

²⁵So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The Sermon

Do you know how big God is?

The writer of Psalm 139 had an inkling:

“If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
...at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me [and] hold me fast.
“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,’
...even the darkness is not dark to you.”ⁱ

Bigger than the farthest extent of the universe;
bigger than all the darkness the world can throw at you.

Do you know how big God is?

Job had a sense of it. Over 35 Old Testament chapters, Job had presented an indisputable, watertight case that a profound cosmic injustice had been laid on him, and that it wasn't fair—there was no justice to it.

The deductions of Job's learned, faithful, theologically accomplished friends exposed the overconfident emptiness of the finest theology of the day.

And in the end, after God answered Job out of the spectacular, swirling, deafening wind,

Job, in a statement of profound, ultimate faith, said to God, whose lovingly awesome response had *replied* to Job, but hadn't *resolved* a single thing:ⁱⁱ

"I know that you can do all things, that no purpose of yours can be thwarted... I have uttered things I didn't understand, things too wonderful for me, that I didn't know... I had heard *of* you, but now my eye sees" (Job 42:2-5).ⁱⁱⁱ

From a legalistic standpoint, the ending of Job is unsatisfying, which is exactly what Job understands: sometimes, it's going to feel like everything in the universe is conspiring against me. But God is bigger than the universe—and is on my side.

When our lives are permeated by an unrestricted, constant flood of news, that means we are, practically by definition, bombarded with *bad* news: sometimes terrifying, sometimes depressing, sometimes disappointing; disgusting, heartbreaking, infuriating, exhausting.

Sometimes, just when it seems like you've finally got a handle on the way life is or the way the world works, another piece of news comes along and shatters the illusion.

As Leonard Cohen said, when he learned, at age 70, that a manager had pilfered his entire savings of five million dollars, leaving him with only a few thousand: "It's enough to put a dent in one's mood."^{iv}

Sometimes we get jolted into a harsh reality that no bumper sticker can answer.

In the face of horrifying, heart-wrenching, sickeningly unsurprising mass shootings;

in the agonizing roll call of people we've looked up to and enjoyed, now exposed for stupefyingly monstrous mistreatment and abuse of others, including the most vulnerable;

in the daily barrage of the aches and pains in our conditions, our situations, and our prospects;

in the broken relationships, and the deep, private wounds, the events and circumstances themselves expose the vacuousness of statements like, “Don’t tell God how big your problems are; tell your problems how big God is.”

That’s a lovely sentiment when things are going OK. But it rang a bitterly sour note when a megachurch preacher in Houston tweeted, from his unaffected mansion, in the catastrophic aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, don’t worry: “God’s got this.”^v

God may have “had this” as far as that preacher understood it. But not far from that minister’s front door in a gated community, people were sick and homeless and profoundly traumatized and dying.

Does that preacher know how big God is? Does anybody?

Joshua had a thought about it.

After a successful career of conquering kings and taking territory, Joshua stood before all the tribes of Israel, and said to the people,

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Your ancestors lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took Abraham and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many...

“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

“Now if you’re unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

And the people answered, “Far be it from us to serve any other gods; it was God who brought us up from slavery, God who protected us along the way. We’ll serve the LORD, our God.”

And Joshua said to the people, “*You* can’t serve the LORD, He’s a holy God. He’s a jealous God. He’s not going to forgive your transgressions or your sins.”

Do you know how big God is?

“If you forsake the LORD and serve other gods, he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.”

And they all said, “No, we’ll serve the LORD!”

And Joshua said to the people, “You have chosen the LORD.”

And they said, “We are witnesses.”

He said, “You’ve got to put away all the other gods you’ve got, and lean your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

And they said, “That’s the one.”

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day.

But he also made statutes and ordinances for them, which is part of the reason why somehow, I get the feeling that somewhere in the back of his mind, Joshua’s thinking, “I don’t think these people have any idea how big God is—that God’s big enough to want something with every single one of them.

I don’t know if they’re thinking on the scale of what God wants to do in this world, and in their lives; what it means to follow God with all that we are, and all that we have, and all that we can do.”

Does anybody know how big God is?

When Jesus came to Jerusalem to meet the cross that was being prepared for him, he went to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples came to him privately,^{vi} and he gave them stern warnings to be careful of anybody who would come and try to tell them that it was all over.

And from there he launched into a long discourse about things that would soon be happening, a lot of which must have struck them as deeply disconcerting, for one thing; and baffling, for another.

“You’ll hear of wars and rumors of wars...there will be famines and earthquakes... [and] all this is only the beginnings of the birth pangs.”^{vii}

“They’ll hand you over to be tortured... You’ll be hated because of my name... The love of many will grow cold” (24:9-12).

Terrifying, depressing, disappointing; disgusting, infuriating, heartbreaking, exhausting. It’s enough to put a dent in one’s mood.

“But the one who endures to the end will be saved,” Jesus told them, before adding:

“And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world.

“And then the end will come” (Matthew 24:13-14).

Well, thank you, Jesus; I’m sure we’ll have a lot of success telling everybody all that *good news*.

And then he launched into a series of stories illustrating how important it was going to be that they keep watch, keep ready, keep awake—including the one about the five foolish bridesmaids who weren’t ready, and the five wise ones who were.

Those disciples may or may not have had any idea just how big God is.

But God was getting ready to do something huge. And when it happened, the world was going to need them.

As they gathered around Jesus and listened to the message that he bafflingly but relentlessly called good news,

they may have wondered what it meant for themselves, and what they intended to do with their lives, as they began to realize how big God is.

As Joshua looked out over the crowd of Israelites, he may have wondered:

What would all these people choose to do with their God-given lives, if they knew how big God is?

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about how the incomprehensible wonder of life and the vast mystery of death would meet in the middle of an eternity that still is not as wide and deep and vast as God,

I wonder if he was twitching with excitement over what that church could do, once they came to terms with how big God really is.

What would you do with your life if you knew how big God is?

Mother Teresa said, "I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world."^{viii}

God says to the world, I will encompass you in love.

God says to the faithful, I will forget your failings, but I will always remember you.

God says to everyone who lives, I will keep holding on to you as long as you have tears to cry.

Jan Richardson has written a blessing called, "How the Light Comes."^{ix}

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.

What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.

That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden
what is lost
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still

to the blessed light
that comes.

Do you know how big God is? Neither do I.

But I know that when they say, “Choose this day whom you will serve,”
it’s the bigness of God’s love for the world,
it’s the bigness of the hope God gives the world in Jesus,
it’s the bigness of the faith that God has already shown and planted
in you and me,

that gives me all the strength I need to be able to say, without hesitation, “As for
me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

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ⁱ Psalm 139:8-12 (NRSV)

ⁱⁱ Job 40:6-41:34

ⁱⁱⁱ While the NRSV records, “Now my eye sees you,” the Hebrew looks to me like there is no object in this phrase, and the line is better translated simply, “now my eye sees.”

^{iv} Sylvie Simmons, *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 447

^v <http://www.ibtimes.com/joel-osteen-refuses-shelter-houston-harvey-victims-church-twitter-claims-2583618>

^{vi} Matthew 24:3

^{vii} Matthew 24:6-8

^{viii} Often quoted, though I have not yet traced the original source. I remember being told in 1989 that she had said this in a speech. It showed up on a website of inspirational quotes just now, so it is obviously still in circulation.

^{ix} Jan Richardson, “How the Light Comes: For Christmas Eve,” in Richardson, *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015).