

Ready for anything: Matthew 25:1-13

by [Andrew Warner](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

Elections produce overwhelming hope or overwhelming disappointment. On the Wednesday morning after a national election, one half of the country wakes up disappointed with the other half. If it's our candidate who's won, we celebrate the new day dawning. In defeat we ruminate, despairing for the future and wondering bitterly about fraud.

The intensity of our reactions to elections ought to give us pause as Christian pastors and laity. Are we faithful in our projection of confidence and treachery onto presidential candidates? In responding to the election as if it were a matter of life and death, do we place too much power in the hands of the president and too little in Jesus?

The liturgical year was not devised for the U.S., yet its rhythms fit the nation in an election year. November begins with national elections and ends with Christ the King Sunday, a reminder that Christ is the sovereign who matters most.

In this liturgical year we have been immersed in Jesus' apocalyptic parables and teachings just as the race for the presidency has come to an end, with scripture passages serving as a mirror in which we see our own peculiar American political apocalypticism even as we hear the call of Christ to prepare for the greater kingdom.

When Ronald Reagan announced his bid to become president at the New York City Hilton in 1979, he summarized the nation's political eschatology: "Someone once said that the difference between an American and any other kind of person is that an American lives in anticipation of the future because he knows it will be a great place." He continued in his trademark optimistic vein by adding, "There remains the greatness of our people, our capacity for dreaming up fantastic deeds and bringing them off to the surprise of an unbelieving world. When Washington's men were freezing at Valley Forge, Tom Paine told his fellow Americans: 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again.' We still have that power."

Reagan then chastised President Jimmy Carter for his management of the economy, energy and security. In each of these crises Reagan saw the nation at a dangerous junction.

Although Barack Obama and John McCain excite partisan emotion, they have deviated very little from the playbook of Reagan. Our two major political parties may differ in important ways, but they share an embrace of a political eschatology that marries danger today with hope tomorrow.

A quick glance at Jesus' parable of the ten bridesmaids gives the impression that the modern American obsession existed centuries ago: having enough oil! But Jesus sketches the eschaton in ways that run against the grain of our political language. Whereas Reagan spoke (and Obama and McCain speak) of an optimistic tomorrow, the parable ends with a disquieting judgment on the foolish, who when they beg, "Lord, lord, open to us," hear from behind the closed gate, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Jesus suggests that the future may not be a great place for all. How un-American.

Part of the difference between a politician's eschatology and Jesus' is their timing. Reagan was beginning his quest for the presidency; the future would be bright under his leadership. Jesus spoke of the ten bridesmaids as he was preparing for a night when his own disciples would be separated into the wise and the foolish (and the deceitful). He knows that "after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." No wonder he does not sound optimistic.

There is another difference between these visions of the future. The American vision is one of clear hope, a confident promise: "It will be better." Jesus leaves us with a question, an eschatological deliberation: "Are we wise or foolish?"

How similar the bridesmaids must have looked in their wedding finery—perhaps like modern ones dressed in similar outfits of a garishly bright hue or a subdued pastel, depending on the tastes of the bride (though in most translations Jesus' parable does not mention a bride). These bridesmaids awaited the groom—as clear a metaphor for Jesus as any in the parables. The ten women fell asleep but then awoken at the noise of celebration. Now the problem arises—some have not prepared for the moment. Panicked, they run for more oil. How foolish of them to think that a store in the village would be open at midnight!

The wise bridesmaids came with enough oil. The oil and lamps are elusive symbols in this parable, ones that could represent learning or devotion or acts of charity. In whatever way we understand them, what matters is that the wise bridesmaids prepared for the situation.

Again, the difference between a political eschatology and that of Jesus is the difference between an affirmation and a question. "The present situation is dire" is the message of our politics, whether it is the Russian invasion of Afghanistan or our own wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Grim realities face us," either in a hostage situation or one country's invasion of another.

A Christian apocalypticism realizes that any situation can seem dire, any night can seem long and dark, so that the important question is, "Are we prepared?" Are we learning God's word, doing God's work and praising in God's Spirit in season and out of season?

As ardently as we feel the loss or the victory of our particular choice for president, Jesus calls us away from political affirmations to face a more important question: Are we prepared, whatever may come?