I begin with a word of thanks to all who led worship last week. For Dan Dibbert and his reminder that as imperfect as we are, we are considered blessed by our Savior and can serve as a blessing to the world.

Thank you to Nancy Jacquet and the incredible discussion she had with the children about the nature of saints. It made me think of the hymn "I Sing the Song of the Saints of God." Do you recall it? The first verse goes like this:

> 1 I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true,
> who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.
> And one was a doctor, and one was a queen, and one was a shepherdess on the green; they were all of them saints of God, and I mean, God helping, to be one too.

Finally, I want to thank Triumph, Mark and Julianna for their worship leadership. Colleen shared with me that Triumph was super nervous about standing here with me and leading the introduction to the prayers. But she did it. She's five years old, friends, and she pushed through her fears - with Colleen's encouragement - and she stood before you! Sure, she was timid. Sure, she was quiet. But she did it, and that was so brave!

I want us to acknowledge that. Because our experience is so limited with having children assist in worship leadership, our inclination is to comment on how cute they

are. I'm not knocking the reaction, I just want to challenge us to push past it and understand how significant their participation is.

If Triumph understands that when she is gathered with people of faith, and she has the support to act even when she's scared, then we are doing the work of Jesus. I think it has been said that there are 365 admonitions in scripture to "be not afraid" or "do not fear" - one for every day of the year. It's such an important element for people of faith, that we need to train ourselves to push past fear and anxiety, and trust in the promises of God.

This is the foundation of the text from the psalm: teach the children the parables, the words of God from long ago, so that the Word may be with them from one generation to the next. As it says in another psalm, “Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (throughout the entirety of my life).” (Psalm 119:105)

Now Triumph knows that when she stands up before the congregation she will be seen and heard. So the next time she has a responsibility, she will do so with a bit more confidence. The more she practices her faith, the more comfortable she will grow in exercising it -- the more confident she will be in trusting in it -- so that when the time comes when she is called upon to stand up against injustice, she will remember that it is her faith that has made her strong and her faith will set her free.

This object lesson is directly related to the parable of the bridesmaids. Remember, Jesus is teaching in metaphor. As we discussed in Bible study, Jesus has placed before

his audience the scene of a cohort of 10 bridesmaids who are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. Once the groom shows up, then the proceedings may get underway. Part of their responsibility is to keep the homelights burning until he arrives. Jesus sets it up that there are 5 “wise” attendants who are prepared with an extra stash of oil in case the groom arrives past the time they were due; and there are five “foolish” attendants who did not do the work to procure the extra oil.

In Jesus’ allegory, the groom represents the coming of the Messiah who will bring about the so-called “Day of the Lord.” This is a long-standing prophetic vision of a time when the existing structures of power and authority will be held accountable; when the vindication of the faithful will be fulfilled (those who have suffered under oppressive powers, will ultimately be vindicated); and, finally, it is the fulfillment of the hope that God’s justice, peace, and righteousness will become the defining reality of human existence.

The ten attendants represent all who have been awaiting the coming of the Messiah. However, not everyone has done the work to be prepared for it. The five characters who have their extra reserve of oil represent those who have practiced their faith in all manner of situations, which in turn allows them to feel like they are prepared to meet their Savior whenever the Christ is in their midst.

In a couple of weeks we will discuss another of Jesus' parables - the judgement of the sheep and goats. Here's a spoiler - the denouement of the story comes when the people understand that when they chose to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit

the imprisoned, they found they were doing so to the Christ in their midst. And when they forsook the opportunity to do the same, they were denying compassion to the Christ in their midst.

Those who fed and clothed were filling the proverbial lamps in our current parable. Those who did not, were not. The more we practice the teachings of Jesus, the more we fill our spiritual lamps with the oil of faith. When we tend to our sister or brother, no matter who they appear to be to us, we do so out of the inclination to love our neighbors as our self.

Now, is this easy? No ma'am, no sir. Martha Clinger has introduced the term Implicit Bias to us. It is “a negative attitude, of which one is unaware, against a specific social group that leads to unequal treatment.... We can hold these automatic associations even if we consciously reject discrimination and value equality.” We are, unfortunately, acculturated to judge others. Right? We are all victims of and perpetrators of implicit bias. For example, we're acculturated to see children leading worship as cute, rather than as being disciples in training (like the rest of us). The more we're trained to see the strangeness in the stranger rather than the gracious humanity of our neighbor, and act out of fear and judgement, the more we deplete our reserves of faith in God’s beloved community.

So, when the Christ says "I do not recognize you," we must wrestle with who we think we are, and do deep discernment about who we need to become. So that the next time

we serve the one whom we are called to follow, our Savior looks us in the eye and says, "Ah, there you are. Now I see YOU."

We engage in the disciplines of worship and study and service -- we pray with and for one another -- so that we can accumulate our faith for the long haul. Calling ourselves "Christians" may be easy when life is easy. But notice when the bridegroom representing the Christ shows up. It isn't on time -- it isn't when it was expected. No, it was in the middle of the night -- metaphorically in the dark night of the soul; when we can be at our most fearful, or feel the most vulnerable, or even feel abandoned – that God will never show up!

Friends, do you agree with me that there are times that are bleak - when the weight of the world is pressing down on us and we do not feel that relief is possible? Do we know times when injustice and inequity appears to be having its day and there is no end in sight?

It is during those times when we can't just count on our emotional and spiritual strength to carry us. A balm in Gilead does not appear to be available to us. In those moments we need to call on those reserves I spoke of earlier, that help us literally keep the faith and know that God will show up.

Then something happens. Something occurs that breaks the cycle of corruption – and justice once again seems possible. Dr. King once said that "the arc of the moral

universe is long, and it bends towards justice." Sometimes, something comes along that tugs on that arc, and brings it just a bit closer to those who have been waiting. Like with those bridesmaids who were carrying their reserves of faith; who were prepared to wait patiently for the day, the time of their Savior's arrival received their moment of joy. Has anyone borne witness to such a time as this – perhaps recently?

Ah, but we know, the time of fulfillment has not come fully. There is still much work to be done. So we press on. And we do so by continuing to lead the way for our young ones, like Triumph, creating hope for the long haul by modeling, through the way we live, what it means to be a saint who follows the way of Jesus.

I'll conclude with the final verse of the hymn to which I referred at the beginning, *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*.

> 3 They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still.
> The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will.
> You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store, / in church, by the sea, in the house next door, they are saints of God whether rich or poor, and (we) mean to be (them) too.

If we indeed mean to be the saints of God, give me a robust "Amen."

Excellent - now let's join together in singing the African-American spiritual based on Jesus' parable. Glory to God #350 or on the screen.