

Extra Oil

It was a cold winter evening in Seoul. The sky was heavy with clouds that refused to snow, while the chilly wind left people rubbing their hands and stamping their feet in order to feel some warmth. Everyone on the street was rushing: either heading back home from work or going shopping or meeting up with friends. It was four days before Christmas day in 2004. It was the most memorable day in my life, my wedding day. It was also the winter solstice, which is traditionally the beginning of a new year in Korea. The winter solstice possesses the shortest day and longest night of the year, which means that the energy of the sun is about to recover and re-emerge. Most people I knew did not understand why we picked the evening of Tuesday, December 21st for our wedding ceremony. Well, I did not understand either; I just trusted Ha Na and her dream in which she received the date. But now I understand why that one day was chosen out of all the days in the year.

Yin and yang are considered to be opposites: cold and warm, shade and light, inside and outside. But if you think of opposites as being things that are furthest away from each other, then yin and yang aren't opposites; they co-exist and require each other. If there is no light, there is no shade. Without inside, there is no outside. Further, whenever one quality reaches its peak, it will naturally begin to transform into the opposite quality: for example, grain that reaches its full height in summer – fully yang – will produce seeds and die back in winter – fully yin – in an endless cycle. Yin and Yang are bound together as parts of a mutual whole, just like you cannot have the back of a hand without the front. This yin and yang philosophy gives us both hope and caution; whether everything seems to be going wrong or right we know that this is not the end of the cycle of hope and despair. We know there is always a hidden light in our darkest time and a dark shadow over the brightest side of our life. The first day of winter in 2004 was a hidden lesson for me to understand the complexity and irony of a life which is made of yin and yang balance.

Wedding ceremonies in Jesus' day started in the evening too. Guests assembled at the home of the bride and were entertained by her parents while waiting for the groom. When the bridegroom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, lit torches and went out to greet him. Forming a festive procession, the entire party would walk to the groom's home where his parents would host the ceremony and the following extended banquet that would continue for several days. In today's parable, for whatever reason, the groom does not show up on time; the hours pass, and many of the waiting party fall asleep. Finally, at midnight, they are awakened with a shout, "He's coming." The bridesmaids leap into action, trim their lamps, and head out to meet him. Five of the ten have used up their oil and have no reserves. Their attempt to borrow some from their wiser, more prudent sisters is rejected. Frantically, they set out in search of oil, not easy at midnight, and in the process miss the procession. When they finally arrive at the groom's home, they are locked out and dismissed. "Keep awake," Jesus concludes, "You do not know the day nor the hour."

Delay is difficult. Whether we are on hold while waiting to speak with a live customer-service representative, enduring a slow Internet connection, or suffering through a too-busy day in the emergency room, delay frustrates those living in a fast-paced world. As a result, we prize faster communications, travel, food. We want fast answers to prayer, instant money, overnight weight loss, achievement without effort. "Are we nearly there yet?" is not just the cry of children traveling in the back seat of a car; we adults also wish for life to accommodate our own accelerated timetable.

We need to learn patience, and this is particularly true when waiting for God. Consequently, the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids speaks a profound word to a fast-paced twenty-first-century populace; it is a fresh reminder of the need to prepare for delay, specifically the delayed kingdom of God. The early Christians had to adjust to the reality that Jesus did not return as they fully expected, and that their mission was to wait expectantly and in the meantime live faithfully, courageously, hopefully. That is our mission still.

Initially, all the bridesmaids are indistinguishable: they each dress for the wedding and come to it; they carry lamps; they all say, "Lord, Lord"; and each of them falls

asleep. What distinguishes the foolish and wise is *readiness* for the bridegroom, even in the case of delay. The wise are prepared for delay, so they brought extra oil.

What does the extra oil mean? Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”. At the end of the same sermon, Jesus reminds the people, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven”. Similarly, the oil in this parable can be understood as faith, good works, practices, or spiritual reserves that remain constant and shine during difficult times as well as the good, because they are all times of waiting for God. I don’t think the wise bridesmaids brought their extra oil by chance. Imagine how the wise bridesmaids prepared for the wedding before they left their houses, and why they brought extra oil. They might have foreseen a possible delay as a part of the whole wedding ceremony, one unpredictable element of the anticipated union. While the foolish bridesmaids were focused on what *should* be, the wise bridesmaids thought of what *might* be. They are the ones who see both a hidden light in the darkest time and a dark shadow over the brightest side, understanding that you cannot have a full circle without both sides.

The balance of yin and yang is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the following of Christ. Jesus talked about his death when he was alive, the disciples experienced the risen Christ after his death, and the first Christian community had to find a way to live faithfully in the delay of Christ’s return. Our faith in Christ doesn’t guarantee us an easy life or a hard life; instead it keeps us moving, living and waiting in the wholeness of God.

My wedding day symbolized the start of a new year, the start of a new life together with my wonderful wife. From the longest night of the year, the promise of renewal, of light, of future warmth and sunshine. A circle of challenge and hope, darkness and light, to be lived in together. None of us can say with certainty what’s next, how long we have to wait for something good, or bad, to happen. We only know that it’s a circle, and whatever we’re waiting for will come to us in God’s time.