

Don't think you can coast to the finish line,  
Running on Empty.  
I once headed off to give a workshop  
to a group of librarians in Kokomo, Indiana,  
back in the days before GPS or even Mapquest.  
I allowed enough time for the expressway trip  
but failed to estimate how long it would take on  
surface roads, with school buses and farm trucks.  
I was 45 minutes late for Time Management.  
One time our family of 5 headed off to grandma's  
on a frosty Thanksgiving morn, running on empty.  
Do you think we could find gas on the way?  
Nope. Nothing open, even on the interstate.  
Modern living is like that:  
We don't take care of our needs as they arise.  
We wait for a better time, a better price,  
a better opportunity.  
And so, we're always Running on Empty.  
But at any moment, it could be too late.  
As it is for the five maidens  
who wait to buy lamp-oil until the last minute.  
When they return from the store and beg,  
"Lord, Lord, let us in!" – it's too late.  
The party's already started.  
The parable is a cautionary tale  
about being prepared.  
Festive weddings, and the need to prepare for them,  
are frequent Gospel images  
for the Great Banquet in the final days of history.  
John's gospel begins with Jesus and his mother  
at a wedding in Cana,  
where Jesus saves the unprepared host  
who has run out of good wine.  
In Matthew, Chap. 9, Jesus says to John's disciples:  
"The wedding attendants cannot mourn  
as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?  
The days will come when the bridegroom  
is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

Recall the parable in Matthew 22  
about the king's wedding banquet for his son.  
The invited guests fail to show up.  
The king invites anyone he can find to fill the hall.  
One poor fellow rounded up off the street  
enters the party without proper attire.  
The king throws the guest into outer darkness.  
Just showing up isn't enough to enter the party.  
In that parable, and in the Ten Maidens story,  
Jesus is saying in effect, For the Final Banquet,  
the great feast at the end of time,  
you had better be more than  
simply present and accounted for.  
**Be prepared.**  
Don't think you can coast to the finish line,  
Running on Empty,  
and expect to enter God's presence.  
To fully appreciate the Ten Maidens story  
we need the cultural background of the times.  
A bridal party assembles at the Groom's home,  
while the Groom visits the Bride's father  
to settle upon a dowry.  
Once that's negotiated, the Bride and Groom  
process to his home to begin the wedding.  
Assuming this is to be an evening wedding,  
lamps are lighting the way, held by maidens.  
But this wedding is delayed by the groom.  
All ten maidens fall asleep waiting.  
Everyone's wedding lamp gutters out.  
We are told five maidens are prudent.  
They bring flasks of oil, just in case they need it.  
Perhaps these five over-functioning maidens  
know the groom and his tardy habits.  
Lo and behold, the groom and bride arrive.  
Finally, it's the moment the maidens  
have been waiting for.  
The women smooth their hair  
and shake the wrinkles out of their dresses.

They snip off the charred edges of their wicks,  
 and pour in fresh olive oil.  
 Light the way for the bridal couple!  
 The other five look on in expectation of assistance.  
 "Could you spare a little of your oil, please?"  
 The prudent maidens are unsympathetic.  
 'No,' comes the abrupt reply.  
 'We don't have enough to share.  
 'Go to Royal Farms and buy your own fuel.'  
 And they do.  
 They rush back, banging on the wedding hall,  
 "Lord, Lord, let us in!"  
 Sorry. No admittance.  
 Adding insult to injury, their friend, the groom,  
 acts like a stranger.  
 'Believe me, I don't know you.'  
 I can empathize with the unprepared maidens.  
 They expect the world to work a certain way,  
 and it doesn't.  
 There are some positive aspects to our parable.  
 The ten maidens treat one another ethically.  
 The five prudent maidens do not chide the others.  
 The five foolish maidens do not scorn tradition.  
 All ten awaken at the cry, Here comes the Groom.  
 All ten represent earnest disciples.  
 It would be a mistake to label five as winners,  
 five as losers; five as full, five as empty.  
 The prudent girls preserve their oil for a reason:  
 Better that 5 torches stay lit than all 10 go out.  
 I think these ten women represent the normal,  
 typical ways you and I approach life's uncertainty.  
 I think we can identify with the foolish maidens.  
 Wouldn't any of us feel hurt  
 if good Christian friends turned us down  
 when we asked for a little help?  
 Haven't we all been caught unprepared,  
 when life deals an unexpected blow  
 and the foundation of our faith is shaken?

All of us want to feel good about being  
 among the wise and vindicated ones.  
 Disciples can be in either group at any given time,  
 prepared or unprepared,  
 when "Christ comes again in glory  
 to judge the living and the dead" (Nicene Creed).  
 Many disciples will come to the wedding feast  
 a bit short of whatever it takes  
 to join the celebration.  
 What we all need, but few of us have,  
 is sufficient fuel on-board  
 to power us through an untimely loss.  
 We may have lots of *faith* stored up,  
 in terms of Christian *values* we've learned and lived.  
 We may understand spiritual combustion,  
 and know how to stoke fire through *scripture*.  
 We may think we know what Jesus would do  
 if all the lights of *hope* went out.  
 But if we don't have spiritual fuel when we need it,  
 we're Running on Empty.  
 Our faith community is the 'filling station'  
 for spiritual fuel, not only through *worship*,  
 but also through *prayer, fellowship, and care*.  
 The community loves us when we're unlovable.  
 It checks our selfish impulses  
 and curbs our self-righteousness.  
 The community stirs us to action  
 when we would be complacent.  
 It speaks out when no one of us would.  
 It holds us to the highest ethical standards.  
 It shares our pain, magnifies our blessings,  
 and multiplies our joys.  
 It puts our life struggles into proper context  
 in the goodness of God's creation.  
 Vibrant congregations still make mistakes;  
 mistakes are part of any family story.  
 We are all prodigals.  
 We do not become perfect  
 when we belong to a faith community.

We belong because we are all imperfect.  
 We do not gain entrance to the Kingdom  
 because we belong to a faith community.  
 We belong because none of us could ever  
 gain entrance on our own merits.  
 We are all hired at the last minute  
 for a full day's wage.  
 We are not set apart from (or above) the world  
 because we belong to a faith community.  
 We belong because, like the Good Samaritan,  
 our neighborhood is the world.  
 "Christ will come again in glory  
 to judge the living and the dead."  
 Jesus is warning followers to be vigilant,  
 for the End of Time could happen any moment.  
 But we have been living 2000 years in the hope  
 that Jesus the Bridegroom will return.  
 Small wonder that popular soothsayers  
 regularly identify signs of impending doom.  
 Maintaining a state of constant preparedness  
 is an existential burden.  
 Can't we be excused  
 for Running on Empty, spiritually?  
 Remember Viet Nam, set against the Cold War?  
 I'll use for an example the year 1968.  
 No one's lamp could hold enough optimism  
 to last that long, fateful year.  
 For me, 1968 starts in Pasadena, California.  
 Indiana University has made it to the Rose Bowl,  
 and I am playing trombone in the marching band.  
 We arrive at our starting place in darkness  
 and stand in position for the four-hour wait.  
 It's hard to stay awake.  
 We had started out in the black, chill pre-dawn.  
 It is now a cloudless 80-degree mid-morning.  
 We enter the 5-mile parade, Running on Empty.  
 January 1968: North Korea captures the USS Pueblo.

Just 30 days later, on the Asian New Year's day,  
 the Viet Cong launch the stunning Tet offensive  
 against American and South Vietnamese troops.  
 U.S. defensive action sets the Cong back.  
 Instead of sending 200,000 more troops  
 as requested,  
 President Johnson suspends all further bombing.  
 On March 16 U.S. soldiers  
 commit atrocities against 500 civilians at My Lai.  
 The American public is Running on Empty  
 as regards Viet Nam, at this point.  
 At the end of March, Johnson announces  
 that he will not be running for President.  
 Days later, an assassin kills Martin Luther King Jr.  
 in Memphis. Riots erupt in major cities.  
 On June 5, an assassin kills Robert F. Kennedy  
 in the same Los Angeles hotel ballroom  
 in which I had eaten lunch after the Rose Parade.  
 The nation is still Running on Empty.  
 Halfway through the year, a coup in Iraq  
 elevates Saddam Hussein to power.  
 In August, Soviet forces enter Czechoslovakia  
 to stop the reforms known as 'Prague Spring.'  
 The reformer, Alexander Dubcek, is arrested.  
 Nine months into the year,  
 the Army and the Marines start sending troops  
 back to Viet Nam for involuntary second tours.  
 The nation is spiritually exhausted,  
 heading into the holidays.  
 Then comes Christmas Eve, 1968:  
 Our Apollo 8 astronauts enter lunar orbit,  
 giving humanity its first glimpse  
 of the back side of the moon.  
 On December 24, astronauts beam words  
 back to Earth, words taken from Genesis 1 and 2.  
 And after a whole year of Running on Empty,  
 finally, finally . . . we are filled with awe!

As 1968 started out, our nation had no idea  
how much hope we would need in our lamps  
to lighten the darkness of 11 months and 24 days.  
. . . how ineffectual services of worship would be  
in a period of history draining our nation.  
. . . how much prayer we would need  
to weather two political assassinations.  
. . . how much faith we would need  
to restore our national pride and purpose.  
. . . how much compassion we would need  
for veterans eventually returning from war.  
And yet, one singular photograph filled our lamps,  
an image of a Big Blue Marble in space.  
It was not until this stunning photo came back  
with the Apollo 8 astronauts  
in late December 1968  
that we saw Earth as a vibrant,  
delicate, blue and white globe  
set against the velvety blackness of space.  
From the great distance of the Moon,  
we all saw our common, fragile habitat.  
All year long we had been asking, Lord, Lord,  
open the gates of salvation for our nation.  
Finally, everyone in our nation was present,  
spiritually fulfilled in a singular moment.  
No one was left outside the door.

#### CONCLUSION

Christ will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead.  
This we believe in faith.  
We cannot know where or when.  
We must not let our spiritual selves run on empty.  
We must be prepared for a long wait,  
so that we can be light  
when the world is dark and forbidding.  
Amen.