

November 12, 2023
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 25:1–13

YOU CANNOT GET READY BUT MUST BE READY.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Terri and I were shopping in Sam’s Club yesterday. They had Christmas music playing over the P.A. system. It seems that everyone is sprinting toward Christmas morning. Perhaps some will slow down for a turkey sandwich on Thanksgiving while planning their Black Friday shopping strategy, but right now, it seems that everyone is in a big hurry to get to Christmas.

The Church Calendar marches to a different beat. Before we look forward to Advent and Christmas, we must close out the old year, of which the Last Sunday of the Church Year is just two weeks away. And as the Church Year draws to a close, these last Sundays are traditionally appointed with Scripture lessons that focus on the End Times: the end of this world and Judgment Day when:

“... the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17)

The world’s calendar is very different. There is no mention of the end times, Judgment Day, and Christ’s return. As a matter of fact, if you publicly mention the end of the world apart from the context of global warming or nuclear war, you’re opening yourself to scorn and mockery. [sarcasm on→] They’ll say: *“Take off your tinfoil hat! The Bible is merely a book of fables... fables of Jesus who told tales of judgment 2,000 years ago. He said He was coming soon, but if He hasn’t come in the last 2,000 years, why should anyone believe that He’ll come in the next 2,000?”* [← sarcasm off]

But Jesus said it would be this way. Speaking of His second coming on the Last Day, He said:

“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” (Matthew 24:36–39)

It sounds just like today! So Jesus says:

“Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”
(Matthew 24:42)

He says:

“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Matthew 24:44)

Nobody knows when Jesus will come. There’s an old saying that says: *“Those who’re counting on 11th hour salvation are going to be eternally lost if Jesus returns at 10:45.”* And that takes us to today’s Parable of the Ten Virgins. Jesus says:

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them.” (Matthew 25:1–3)

In Holy Scripture, the ***“kingdom of heaven”*** can refer to several different things. We usually think of the ***“kingdom of heaven:*** as the place where God dwells with Christ at His right hand righteously ruling and reigning over all creation. Yet, think of John the Baptist preaching who came preaching:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2)

And after Jesus’ Baptism, He Himself preached:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

So if the ***“kingdom of heaven”*** or ***“kingdom of God”*** is at hand among those to whom John and Jesus preached, it tells us that the God of heaven Himself has come down to reign through His kingly words and deeds. In St Matthew’s Gospel, Matthew describes the ***“kingdom of heaven”*** as not primarily a place, but also as a divine action that occurs wherever Jesus is, performing His kingly deeds of salvation through His Word, the Good News of the reign of God in Christ Jesus. Not only in Bible days but He continues to reign and accomplish His kingly purposes today through the proclamation of His Word and in His sacramental gifts in Baptism and Lord’s Supper. (cf: Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary, 49-50) And He will continue to do so until He returns to reveal the full glory of His reign of heaven on the Last Day.

The Bridegroom in the parable is Christ Jesus and the ten virgins represent all who claim Christ as their Lord and Savior. But God alone sees into the hearts of men and women and knows who has true faith. In the parable, the five wise virgins have lifesaving faith and the five foolish are simply going through the motions, giving lip service of faith but do not bear fruits of repentance and faith. Yes, just as not all who followed Jesus 2,000 years ago were true disciples, not all will be found to be true believers when Christ returns on the Last Day.

The marriage feast refers to the to the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom in eternity. (cf: Revelation 19:6–9) Entrance into the feast with the Bridegroom refers to the Last Day when the risen and ascended Christ Jesus will physically return to grant all true believers their share in His bodily resurrection and His heavenly inheritance guaranteed by His death and resurrection. Death will be swallowed up in victory and we will dwell in eternal joy with our Triune God in

the new heavens and new earth. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:50–55; 2 Peter 3:13) Being shut out and excluded from the feast represents eternal rejection and damnation.

No one knows the day or hour of Christ's return. The parable says the Bridegroom was delayed and the virgins all became drowsy and slept. (cf: Matthew 25:5) We live in that time now when Jesus tarries. Faith becomes drowsy. Yet people continue to attempt to predict His return. It seems that every generation has its own false prophets that prey on foolish and gullible people willing to buy into their deceitful proclamations. When I was in high school, the televangelist Pat Robertson predicted the world would end in the year 1982.

(<https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/12/20/apocalypse-not-other-times-the-world-was-supposed-to-end-and-didnt>) But further back in 1970, in his book “*The Late Great Planet*

Earth,” author Hal Lindsey’s suggested that Jesus’ would return within one generation of the founding of the nation Israel in 1948... which would’ve been around 35 years ago. The New York Times called Lindsey’s book the “number one *non-fiction bestseller of the decade*.”

(https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/899325.The_Late_Great_Planet_Earth#CommunityReviews) Doom and gloom always sells books and newspapers. Until Jesus does return, there will always be false prophets peddling their phony predictions, but the only book that matters is God’s Word. It’s not a book of doom and gloom – but it’s the Good News of Christ Jesus which is the power of salvation for all who believe. (cf: Romans 1:16) And the Bible is clear:

“... concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son...” (Matthew 24:36)

Christ’s glorious return will happen suddenly. You cannot get ready. You just need to be ready. Jesus tells this parable for all who call themselves Christian. You can’t tell the difference between the wise and the foolish... between the true believers and unbelievers. They all have lamps. They hang out together. They look and act alike. The only difference between them is – the wise virgins have oil for their lamps and the foolish virgins don’t. What is the oil? The oil represents whatever it takes for you to be ready to honor the Bridegroom when He comes again in glory. The oil is true humble faith in your Savior Christ Jesus, bearing fruits of repentance and fruits of faith, the willingness to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus, suffering for the Name of Christ, and serving and loving your neighbor just as God in Christ Jesus serves and loves you.

In our modern context, the foolish virgins go to church. They hear the Gospel proclaimed and receive the sacraments. But they don’t treasure and trust in God’s means of grace. They figure they know all they need to know. They’re going through the motions of being Christian. They don’t fear, love, and trust in God above all things. They don’t long for God’s Name to be hallowed. They don’t abide and cling to Christ’s Word of truth in the Gospel. They don’t prepare themselves to receive and honor Christ when He comes on the Last Day.

So, what is this true humble faith in your Savior Christ Jesus? There is no fire in your lamp without the oil of faith. There is no faith in the heart without the teaching and hearing of God’s Word. Faith isn’t something you and I come up with by our own works, reason, or strength. It is God’s work in you. He alone prepares you to receive and honor Christ when He comes on the Last Day. He alone works faith when and where He chooses. And He teaches us in Scripture

exactly where He creates and sustains this faith: in His means of grace in His Word and Sacraments.

Right here in the Divine Service is where God equips you to honor and receive Christ Jesus when He returns on the Last Day. It's where He pours out all His gifts that Christ won for you in His perfect life on earth, in His bloody and gruesome death on the cross in your stead, and in His glorious resurrection from the grave so that you are declared not guilty of your sins. It's where He prepares you to receive and honor Christ when He comes on the Last Day to grant you and all true believers your share in His bodily resurrection and His heavenly inheritance guaranteed by His death and resurrection. Death will be swallowed up in victory and you will dwell in eternal joy with your Triune God in the new heavens and new earth.

Christ's glorious return will happen suddenly. You cannot get ready. You just need to be ready. The foolish virgins in the parable neglected the oil. They didn't think much of it. When they needed it the most, they didn't have it and they couldn't get it. Now is the time to listen. Now is the time to take God's Word to heart. Now is the time to get the oil that keeps faith alive for the hour when Jesus comes to take His Church to heaven. He says:

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done." (Revelation 22:12)

He is coming to bring His saints into Himself in heaven and condemn all unbelievers to hell. Among the unbelievers will be people who were attached to the church but didn't actually belong to it. They had lamps but had no oil of faith. They were with those who came to the wedding feast and tried to enter, but the Bridegroom answered:

"Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." (cf: Matthew 25:12)

So Jesus concludes with a warning:

"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (Matthew 25:13)

You cannot get ready. You just need to be ready. You need to be where God prepares you to receive and honor Christ when He comes on the Last Day. He alone works faith when and where He chooses. He does it by means of His Word and Sacrament. And in the meantime, as you await His return, bear fruits of repentance and fruits of faith. Hear and share the Gospel. Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus, suffering for the Name of Christ, and serving and loving your neighbor just as God in Christ Jesus serves and loves you.

Christ says:

"Surely I am coming soon." [And to that we say] ***"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"***
(Revelation 22:20)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.