

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
November 12, 2023  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church  
**A Time for Watchfulness**

Dear friends in Christ,

We are approaching the end of the church year. Yes, Advent and Christmas are just around the corner! But before we get there, the lessons in these last weeks of the church year direct us to the second coming of Christ. The Son of God took on our human flesh and blood as the Son of Mary about 2000 years ago. This same Jesus will come again at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. But we don't know when. We are living in the "Time Between" Christ's first and second comings. Since we don't know how long this "Time Between" will be, how should we live? Jesus tells us how in the three parts of Matthew 25. We consider the parable of the 10 Virgins today, the parable of the Talents next week and the Separation of the Sheep and Goats in two weeks. Today, Jesus encourages us to watchfulness as we live in the time between. Listen to Jesus' parable again:

**Matthew 25:1-13 (EHV)**

*"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish ones took their lamps, they did not take any oil with them; but the wise took oil in their containers with their lamps. While the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, 'No, there may not be enough for us and for you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were away buying oil, the bridegroom came. Those who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut. Later, the other virgins also came and said, 'Lord, Lord, let us in.' But he answered, 'Amen I tell you: I do not know you.' Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.*

Jewish wedding traditions have some things in common with wedding traditions today. The bride and her attendants, here the ten virgins, got together on the night before the wedding at the home of the bride. The groom and his attendants got together at his home. We continue to have a tradition of attendants for the bride and groom and sometimes a bachelor & bachelorette party before the wedding. At some time during the night, the guys would make their way to the home of the bride. The bride and her attendants would come out to meet them and the whole party would parade through the streets of the village on the way back to the home of the groom. You can imagine the singing and dancing and joy as the wedding party rejoices. This was the big, public declaration that the bride and groom were now married. I'm sure there was one old grump in each village who told the kids to be quiet. But everyone else had to be rejoicing with the bride and groom and their friends.

Believers are often called the bride of Christ in the Scriptures. Here, we are the bride's attendants. Either way, we are waiting for the groom to arrive so the rejoicing can begin. We are waiting for Jesus to arrive so the eternal wedding feast can begin for us. We are waiting to gather around the throne of God with all the saints and angels and sing with joy. We are ready to feast on the best of

food and drink. Maybe some of us will even be able to dance with joy on that day. There will be no old grump to dampen our joy, no sin to ruin the peace, no sorrow to spoil the celebration.

That will be the best day ever! But what is taking Jesus so long?

*While the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep.*

The wise and the foolish fell asleep. All fell asleep. The difference between the wise and the foolish is not in who can stay awake the longest, but in who is ready when the groom arrives. Some believers have taken extreme measures to stay awake and be ready to meet Christ on the last day. Consider Martin Luther. He wanted to be ready to meet Jesus, so he left the university and his studies in law, sold his law books, and entered a monastery. He worked, prayed, confessed, beat himself, deprived himself of nutrition, a warm bed and peace. He went to the extreme to try to be right with God when Christ arrived.

Others have taken their preparations for Christ's second coming to greater extremes. A false teacher will predict the second coming of Christ and have everyone sell their possessions (or give their possessions to the cult leader). The followers will quit their jobs, leave their families and go into the wilderness or up a mountain to wait for Jesus to return. That idea to a lesser extent can affect regular believers too. If I'm not watching the sky for Jesus all the time, I might miss him.

But take comfort in the fact that the wise virgins also fell asleep. No one knows the day or hour of Christ's return. Don't be anxious about the timing or making sure you are doing something that will impress Jesus on that day. We will all be surprised on that day, but it will be a happy surprise.

On the other end of the extreme behaviors is the example of the foolish virgins. They knew the bridegroom would arrive sometime that night. However, they did not prepare by having oil for their lamps when he arrived. This can happen to us as believers when we think that we have lots of time before Jesus returns. I can also get ready later. School is really busy now so I'll get ready to meet Jesus later. Family is really important now. I'll get ready to welcome Jesus later. I've got to build my career now. I'll get ready for Jesus later. I've got so much to do to get ready to retire. I'll get ready for Jesus later. I'm busier in retirement than ever before. I'll get ready to greet Jesus later.

I realize that I am preaching to the choir today. You are here. You are preparing by staying connected to Christ through the means of grace. You are confessing and receiving his forgiveness regularly. But let this be a warning for all of us. For the thought will likely go through our heads at some point in life, that Jesus can wait because I've got more important things to do. If we let that attitude linger in our minds, we will be like the foolish virgins who did not bring enough oil for their lamps. And when the time comes for us to meet with Jesus, there is no time to go buy more oil. The door will be shut, and Jesus will say to those who disconnected from Christ in life, "I do not know you."

Perhaps we can live somewhere between the extremes in this time between Jesus' first and second comings. We look forward to the eternal feast in heaven, but we continue to live here and now as well. For the Lord has made us his children now. We have been washed clean of sin by the blood Christ shed on the cross. Through the resurrection of Christ, our God has declared us to be not guilty of sin. The Holy Spirit has created faith in our hearts so that we believe and trust in Christ as our Savior. This is the oil we need to be prepared for the arrival of Christ. We need faith and have received it as a gift from the Spirit. We need Jesus and he rules us through faith. We need forgiveness

and have this through the grace of our loving God in Christ. Unlike the oil in the parable, there is no need to buy what we need for meeting Jesus on that day. Everything is freely given and continues to be freely given.

As we live in between the extremes and between Christ's arrivals, we stay ready by doing what we are this morning. We listen to God's Word, pray with and for each other, confess our sins and receive forgiveness, encourage one another as that day approaches, receive the body and blood of Christ for our forgiveness. God gives us the oil to be always ready for Christ's return. But we are not in church all the time. We can't read the Bible all the time. We don't go to the extreme of trying to be reading about Jesus at the very time he arrives.

What will you be doing tomorrow? Maybe school, work, doctor's appointments, taking care of children, taking care of parents, cooking, cleaning, driving, playing soccer, and yes, getting married and celebrating marriages. We don't quit living in this world to prepare for the next. But our attitude as we do all of these life activities changes when we are prepared for the arrival of Christ.

Instead of worrying about what Jesus will think of us on that day, we know what he thinks of us. He gave his life to save us. He finished the payment for our sins on the cross. He loves us with an everlasting love. Knowing what Jesus thinks of us now and what he will say to us on that day changes how we will live now. For Christ has prepared good works for us to do now in our various vocations. God has placed us in different places and situations and relationships with people in order for us to live as Christians. Therefore, we love and serve our God and the people he puts in our lives with all our hearts. Make plans for the next day and next week and next year so that you can love and serve others in your families and workplaces and schools and neighborhoods in the best way you can. In these plans for tomorrow and next year, we include plans for staying ready for Jesus by staying in the means of grace. We live each day as though there will always be another tomorrow. One day we will rejoice when evening and morning are replaced by eternal life.

For one day, the shout will go out into all the world, *'Look, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'*

And we will.

Amen.