

Sunday, November 20, 2022 – Last Sunday of the Church Year

Matthew 25:1-13 (ESV) – “Keep Watch”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

Amen.

“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 wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps....The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came....Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” Thus far our text.

When is the Lord coming back to judge the earth? We don't know when it will be, but we do know that it will probably not be when we expect it. Various church groups over the centuries have tried to predict when, using Scripture and other methods, to place a date on His return. These attempts meet with failure, because we cannot know this information. Jesus tells us that even the Son doesn't know the day or the hour, but only the Father. If Jesus Himself doesn't even know, then how can we think that we will have the precise time? However, just because we don't know when He is coming back, doesn't mean that we can forget about being prepared for His return. We can't just sit back, occupy our thoughts and lives with things of this world, and only be concerned about spiritual things near the end of our earthly lives. Judgment Day could happen at

any time, and/or we could be called home by God at any moment. We just don't know when it will happen – it could be today, or tomorrow, or 100 years from now.

In our text, Jesus warns us about being too complacent when it comes to the things of God, and what will happen to us if we continue to reject the urging of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We will be left out in the cold, like the foolish virgins, because we have rejected the Holy Spirit's urging in our hearts toward faith in Christ, and rather have substituted our own knowledge of things spiritual in place of His leading. Just like a lamp that doesn't have enough oil to burn, so our hearts will be extinguished forever in the fires of hell. This will happen, unless we repent of our sins, and trust in the forgiveness that Christ has wrought for us on the cross of Calvary. He is the only way to be saved; He is the light of the world, that lights the way even when our lamps are empty and our stores of oil depleted. He is the only hope for us in a world that is completely corrupted by the disease of sin.

What can we learn from the foolish virgins and the wise virgins? There will be those among us that refuse to believe or prepare for heaven, and they will continue to be with us until the end of the age. Those in this world that want to live their lives in a worldly way, and care nothing for the things of heaven to come will continue to dwell with us, and try to distract us from the things of God. The foolish virgins in our text tried to tempt the wise virgins to give up some of their oil, so that they too could be prepared for the bridegroom to come. Those who are involved in spreading the corruption in this world of sin and pain and suffering would like nothing more than to take more people down to the depths of sin with them. They tempt us to disobey God, and to do things that He detests, and not do what He loves. The world would have us forsake the worship of

God on Sunday morning in order to pursue financial security for our families. While taking care of the needs of this world is not a bad pursuit in itself, it cannot be allowed to overtake the greatest need, that is, the forgiveness of our sins and the nourishing of our souls that takes place in corporate worship.

The world would have us participate in the things that are displeasing to God, such as rampant sexual immorality, cursing and swearing, and doing all manner of things that accomplish nothing except making us even greater sinners. But, God gives us, and the wise virgins, the power to withstand the temptations that beset us in life. He gives us the ability to stand up to those who dissuade us, and speak the truth to them. He provides us with the opportunity to do so, and the words to say while doing it. He gave the wise virgins the wisdom to save their oil, and not be caught up in the same problem as the foolish virgins when the time came for the bridegroom to arrive. This is not to say that God is encouraging us to hoard the things that He has given us in this life. Rather, He is encouraging us and giving us the strength to resist temptation.

Also, the virgins teach us that the Day of Judgment will be absolute; the door will be shut at the end of time, and there will be no more time to repent of our sins. As it was described between Lazarus and his master, there is a chasm fixed between heaven and hell, so that the glory of heaven is not sullied with sin, like this world has become. We pray every day that the Lord would prevent us from being on the other side of the door when it is shut, and rather be with Him in paradise when that event does take place. What is the requirement to be inside the door when the door is shut and locked? Being prepared – having kept watch! How are we prepared? What strengthens us to keep watch? The Holy Spirit causes faith in us, sustains it through Word and Sacrament, and

causes it to bloom and flourish through good works toward God and our neighbor. We don't prepare ourselves; the Holy Spirit prepares us for an eternity of serving God in His kingdom in heaven. In fact, we cannot prepare ourselves; we would decline to participate every day. Those who believe in Christ will be saved; those who do not believe will be condemned. We know that God creates saving faith in all men; we don't know why some continue to reject Him. It's that simple!

But, the virgins also teach us that Judgment Day is a comfort to those of us living in the hope of life eternal to come. Things today certainly point toward us living in the end times today. There are wars and rumors of wars. There are natural disasters. There are apostasies and false teachings. We know that the earth cannot continue much longer, at least as compared to the scope of human history that is behind us in the past. But, we aren't the first to speculate that we are living near the end of the age. Luther, Pieper and other Lutheran reformers all thought that it was a distinct possibility that Christ would return in their lifetime, given the events that were taking place. The Reformation and the two World Wars certainly seem to match up with the atrocities and difficulties described in the Bible as pointing to the end of the age. Even St. Paul, amidst his imprisonment and persecution for the Name of Christ, thought that Christ would return before he himself was taken up into heavenly glory.

Even though they were all wrong, they were right to see the signs of the times, and think about the end of things that is promised. Whether or not the end comes during our earthly lives, our hope is the same – in the things of God, and not in the things of the earth. We know that even when things get unbearable here on earth, that God will continue to strengthen us and sustain us in the true faith until He comes again. We know

that what is yet to come is so much greater and better than what we are experiencing now, that we don't even have the words or the thought processes to describe it. We just have to wait! I know that this is hard for us who live in the information age, but it is the same as it was generations ago – God will bring about the end of this world, and usher in the beginning of His kingdom of heaven when His time comes, because His timing is always best.

I guess a modern-day example of those being unprepared would include those in the hurricane-ravaged cities of the Southeastern United States a few years ago, and in the Northeast just a couple of years ago, that didn't have adequate provisions for the coming storms. The television screens and radio waves were filled with images of people lined up at gas stations waiting for hours to get a few gallons of fuel to escape the onslaught that was coming soon. They had been warned almost a week in advance that the storm was coming; that they should put things together, and get out before it was too late. They had been warned that they should get gas in their cars, and put food aside for a long journey away from the force of the devastation. But, they delayed, thinking that the predictions of destruction were just oversensitive meteorologists. After all, they had weathered the other hurricanes of recent memory without major damage, so why not this one? They disregarded the warnings just like the children of Israel did the prophets that continued to warn them to prepare for the coming wrath!

Now, I'm not saying this to minimize the horrible suffering that many of the people in those regions have endured, and are still living with. Such horrible tragedies are not God's will; they are the will of the devil, who wreaks his havoc throughout this world, in the hopes of discouraging our faith in God. We should continue to support and

assist those in need, and give of our bounty to those who are lacking the basic necessities of life, even in the aftermath of the storms that have been over for months. But, we should also see an application in their struggles of the same sort of procrastination, the same refusal to believe in a coming certainty, the same trusting of our own knowledge rather than that of God's all-surpassing wisdom.

We are told in Matthew 25 that the day of judgment is coming; it's only a matter of time before it will be here. God cannot abide with sin, and cannot allow it to enter heaven. It would be against His nature to just say that sin doesn't matter. He is holy; we are not. There is a fundamental difference that has to be reconciled! If the judgment were held according to our merits, there would be absolutely no hope of us gaining admittance into heaven. We are by nature sinful and unclean; we have sinned against God every day of our lives. We indeed deserve nothing except His eternal wrath and punishment. But, the day of judgment holds no terror for those who believe in Christ; we will be redeemed from this sinful world on that day. For those who have died in the faith before the day of judgment, that will be the time when their souls will be reunited with their glorified bodies. This is something so wonderful that we can't even imagine it! For those who are still alive that believe in Christ as Savior, they will be brought into heaven directly. They will not pass Go, they will not collect \$200, but will win the victory in Christ Jesus and His merits.

As we come near to the end of this church year, it would be apropos to state that this day is similar to getting close to New Years' Eve, only with much more significance. We shift our focus from the end times, and the necessity of repentance along with patience amid suffering, toward the coming of the Savior, Jesus the Christ, Whose advent

is the reason that we are able to be steadfast and have hope for the future. Had Christ not come, our faith would be in vain, because it would be in things that cannot save us – our own good works. We would not be ready for His coming; we would slack off, and not have enough oil, and would have to resort to gaining our pleasure by misleading others into the same great shame and vice. However, because Christ has indeed come, and filled our lamps, and kept them burning throughout our earthly lives, and even to eternity, we indeed will be inside the house when the door is shut. We have the hope that we will be able to enjoy the party in heaven, the wedding banquet of the Lamb in His kingdom, when our earthly lives are over. In the meantime, we rejoice that God continues to strengthen us with His gifts of Word and Sacrament, and gives us a glimpse into the glorious future that we have to look forward to every time we eat His flesh and drink His blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, for the forgiveness of sins, and the nourishing of our souls. Judgment Day is coming, whether we want it to or not! It will inspire terror for those who have placed themselves outside of the wedding banquet by their refusal to believe; but it will inspire hope and joy for those who have been blessed by God, and who have been given the strength to endure forever in Him. Thanks be to God for His love for us, that He has not willed us to be outside the door, but inside His kingdom of heaven, and that He has done everything to cause our salvation to come about. He sent His Son to suffer, die, and rise again, to save us from our sins. He loves us so much that He delays His coming in order that even more people will be driven to repent of their sins, and receive His Holy Absolution for them. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.