

The Last Sunday of the Church Year
24 November, Anno Domini 2019
St. Matthew 25:1-11
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

As the holidays approach, probably the most uttered phrase I hear is "I'm not ready. There's still so much to do and I just don't have the time I need to do it." If you're like me, after the craze of last holiday season and frantically running around trying to make sure you've got gifts for everyone and all your family's traditional holiday feasting fare, you probably vowed to yourself "I'm not going to let that happen next year. I'm going to be on the ball and get everything ready ahead of time so I can actually enjoy Thanksgiving and give attention to the joy of our Lord's incarnation." Back then, this week felt so far away. How are you doing? Thanksgiving is Thursday. If you're like me, you'll likely be making the same vow again in January.

We are creatures who live in the moment, who often give very little thought to the future because it seems so far away. Sometimes that's by choice and sometimes life leaves you little room to think any further than the next five minutes. And Jesus did say "Don't worry about tomorrow." So there. I don't have to be ready, because God knows what's going to happen and I can't change it anyway.

But Jesus there was talking about fleeting things like food and clothing. Stop worrying about those things because there is something He does want you to always be ready for and preparing for - His return for judgment. There are many times Jesus raises the alarm and says "Be on guard. Beware. Stay awake." And in all those cases it is either watching for the day or watching out for false teachers who will leave you unprepared for that day. We are to be preparing, anticipating, watching for and yearning for the day when the heavenly Bridegroom comes just as He promised. We are to be ready and making sure that those entrusted to our keeping are ready with us so that we are not caught without oil and denied entrance to the eternal heavenly celebration of our salvation.

Ten virgins, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, lamps burning brightly. They were ready at the first. They had been washed and granted the

proper wedding garments of Holy Baptism. Their eyes of faith were wide open in earnest anticipation. They knew He was coming - it was just a question of when. Ten Christians eagerly waiting for Jesus to come back and begin the eternal wedding banquet, to take His children out of this valley of tears into the eternal joy of His presence where there will only be peace and rejoicing. Ten Christians alert, attentive, their hope for their Lord's return burning brightly.

But the wait became too much. They all grew tired. The flames began to dwindle and the children of God closed their eyes. Faith began to dwindle and run low as the night wore on, as temptation distracted them and made their eyelids heavy. "Just a quick snooze. A little sin won't matter. He's taken this long. Why should we think He's going to come back even in our lifetime, let alone, right now? Is He coming back at all? Have I just wasted my time? Have I taken this Christian faith thing too seriously? I'll just try to be good from here on out and that should cover me."

Repent. Stay awake. Listen to the cry of the watchmen whom the Bridegroom sends to call you back to attention and fill your lamps. You don't know the day or hour any more than the ten virgins did and being good or having once believed or having been through confirmation won't get you in the door. It won't be a matter of "Did you believe?" It will be a question of "Do you believe now? What is the treasure of your heart NOW?" The problem is that time goes on as usual. Nothing seems to be happening. More people seem to fall away from the church than join it and we begin to wonder if maybe the Church has it wrong. Christians suffer and the unbelievers watch and sneer just like they did when Noah and his sons were building the giant ark and proclaiming the judgment of God and the coming flood.

We have grown tired as the time has passed, sometimes taking our Lord's return no more seriously than unbelievers. Satan has sown many seeds of false teaching, doubt, and laziness in the Lord's field. The attacks on Christ's Church have grown too numerous to count and we have grown tired of the battle. It goes without saying that we often lose our sense of immediacy and urgency and instead of remaining vigilant and watchful, too often we decide it's easier to just settle in and make ourselves comfortable in this world. We let down our guard against those who teach half-truth lies about Christ and His Word. We have allowed ourselves to buy into the myth of "generic Christianity" as though there is a generic Jesus, hoping to make things easier.

The oil in our lamps has begun to run low and we tune out the cries of the watchmen if we even bother to listen to them any more.

What can be done? How can we be sure to be counted among the five wise virgins? O Lord, we have most certainly fallen asleep. We have paid more attention to our investments, our children's activities schedule, the latest Hollywood gossip, and the local sports scene than we have to your Word. We have given the devil more than just a foot in the door. Plenty of times we have flung open the door for the Prince of Darkness and treated him as a welcome guest of honor in our vengeful thoughts, our boredom with the Word of God, our hesitancy to live sacrificially.

You would certainly be right to shut the door to the kingdom of heaven. And considering the things we have thought and said and done, why would you want to know us?

But you do know us, Lord. You washed us clean of the stain of our sin. You have not only said that you know us, but that you want us to call you "Father". You claim us as your beloved children. Though we have failed to stay awake so often you have mercifully shaken us out of our slumber, putting more oil in our lamps by pouring your Word into our ears and your meal into our mouths.

Beloved in Christ, though you have failed to stay awake, though you have failed to remain watchful, oil remains, because Jesus remains. Each time Zion's watchmen shout from the walls of Jerusalem calling to be prepared because the Bridegroom is coming, each time you have fallen into sin, God's mercy and the promise that awaits His children has drawn you to repentance and fanned into the flame the hope that continues to look toward the day when your Bridegroom will come. But beware. The oil is available but only to those who will receive it as the Lord gives it - through the continued receiving of His Word of absolution, through the daily promise of Holy Baptism, through the Supper of His Body and Blood. And the time to receive this oil will draw to an end. And all who are found without it, all who are found without the faith that comes by the hearing of the Word of Christ, will hear those terrible words "I never knew you."

Why did the five wise bring extra oil? Because they knew that the Bridegroom would come even if it took all night. He had promised and the heavenly Bridegroom is always faithful. They knew it could be a long night. They

weren't morally superior to the foolish virgins. They failed to keep watch too. But they believed that the Bridegroom wanted them in spite of their failure. They knew that only His merciful forgiveness would grant them entrance. They knew who they belonged to and where they were going. They trusted in the grace of the Bridegroom, not themselves.

That being said, it is hard to stay awake in the night, to abstain from pleasures of the flesh. If it weren't, we wouldn't need Jesus. But the truth is that when we fail we hurt ourselves and those we love. We also risk our faith. We waste some oil because sin corrodes faith as it did to Adam and Saul and Judas. It places us into danger. An unconfessed sin, a deliberate sin, a sin without regret or remorse, no matter how small, can completely destroy faith. That is why I say: repent. Five of the virgins were foolish. They looked the same as the wise virgins, but they had given up hope, given into their flesh. Beware. Do not give up hope. Do not stop praying, confessing, hearing, being absolved, eating Our Lord's Body. Be wise. Repent and seek the oil of faith which Christ gives and sustains by the Means of Grace.

This is the only way anyone makes it through the night: by grace. The faith we burn and which keeps us warm, keeps us awake, is given by God. It runs out when we despise the Means of Grace and think we can do without them. But it multiplies as it is exercised and fed. It only goes to waste and withers away when it is neglected and malnourished. Heed the Lord's invitation this day and fill your lamps. Believe His Word. He is here to give forgiveness, strength, and comfort. Your sins of weakness do not stop Him. He is not ashamed of you. He loves you. He speaks to you in His Word. He is with you always in the Office of watchmen who cry out in the night to wake you and speak His absolution. He gives Himself as food for faith hidden in bread and wine. He has named you as His own in the life-giving waters of Holy Baptism. He is your Lord. He will see you through the night.

No matter how foolish you look to the world, or even to yourself in the mirror, no matter what evil, selfish things you have done, things you regret and are ashamed of, it doesn't matter. Those whose trust is in Christ are radiant and pure because He Himself has declared you to be so. Do not be ashamed. You are not dirty. You are not stupid. You are the Bride of Jesus Christ, chosen from all of Creation, to be His and to be with Him forever. Your Baptism was no coincidence, simply something cute we do for babies out of tradition. It is what God Himself arranged. He manipulated the stars and the moon, the

nations, kings, and the winds, to get you there, to get His Name with water upon your head. He made it happen. Because He is coming back and He wants you. Even now, even when you have failed to watch as you should, He wants you. He loves you. He is coming back. He will bring you home.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.