

The Last Sunday of the Church Year
26 November, Anno Domini 2023
St. Matthew 25:1-11

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

Beloved saints of God,

Some of you may remember stock piling canned goods, jugs of water, and maybe even building or at least locating the nearest bomb shelter during the Cold War. Today the government is always encouraging us to be prepared for lots of different possible disasters - earthquakes, tornadoes, and terrorist attacks just to name a few. Preppers are relentlessly mocked (though maybe a little less these days) for their endless bins of dehydrated foods, ammunition, cash, and survival supplies. How many of us actually take the warnings seriously? How many of us are even prepared for a major storm where we lose power and might be stuck inside for a few days, let alone if the entire power grid is wiped out?

A lot of people live in blissful ignorance imagining that these things are either so unlikely or that nothing is going to ever happen to them, that they don't even give thought to what they would need and what they would do and therefore make no preparation at all. We just assume that there will always be affordable food at the grocery store, electricity to run our AC, and clean water to drink. Then, when something does happen, we are utterly shocked and unprepared and therefore the consequences are even more dire than they needed to be. Even Jesus Himself says "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.

Our culture and our world are becoming increasingly more self and moment-centered. We don't want to ask the second-level question "What then?" What if there was a tornado? What if don't set aside some income for a rainy day? What if I don't feed myself and my family with the Word of God and suddenly our church is gone? What would I need next? And there is also the reality that to prepare for the future, you have to make sacrifices now. You can't put money into savings if you're spending it all on shopping sprees and new cars. You can't grow a garden without giving up the time it takes to cultivate it, weed, it, and harvest it. And we simply don't want to be deprived of what we want now so that we can be prepared for a future we don't know about. You can't make sure the Gospel will continue to be preached for your salvation into the future if you're unwilling to say no to other

things now in order to support its continued preaching now.

Preparing is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. The same Jesus who commands us not to worry, also tells us to prepare ourselves for His return for judgment. 10 virgins, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, lamps burning brightly. They knew He was coming - it was just a question of when. 10 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. 10 Christians alert, attentive, their hope for their Lord's return burning brightly.

But the wait became too much. The virgins grew tired. The flames began to dwindle and the children of God closed their eyes. "Just a quick snooze. A little sin won't matter. I can do without reading the Bible or receiving Holy Communion for a bit. Jesus has 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. You don't know the day or hour any more than the 10 virgins did and being good won't get you in the door. The problem is that time goes on as usual. Nothing seems to be happening. We tire of preparing, tire of praying, tire of receiving the Sacrament, tire of listening to the preaching. 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 laugh.

We have grown tired as the time has passed. 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. We have lost our sense of immediacy and urgency. We let down our guard against those who teach half-truth lies about Christ and His Word. We don't know the Small Catechism. We don't daily read the Bible and teach the faith to our children. 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 as we have traded the wisdom of God for the foolishness of men, where sins are no longer sins and the only thing Jesus ever said was "Love each other."

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 presidential debates 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 perverted thoughts, our boredom with the Word of God, our worrying about temporary and earthly things.

“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 awake, putting more oil in our lamps by pouring Your Word into our ears and Your meal into our mouths.”

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, 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.

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 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. When we fail we hurt ourselves and those we love. We also risk our faith. We waste some oil. Because sin corrodes faith. 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.

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. And it doesn't get used up. It actually multiplies as it is exercised and fed. It only goes to waste and withers away when it is neglected and malnourished. The Lord provides Himself by grace in His Word and Sacraments for those struggling to keep watch. He is here to forgive you, strengthen, and encourage you. Your foolish sins 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 He has established that He might lay His hands upon you and absolve you, to speak you clean. He gives Himself as food for faith hidden in bread and wine. He has named you as His own in the killing, life-giving waters of Holy Baptism. He is your Lord. He will see you through the night. He gives you the means by which faith is fed and nourished and strengthened and kept burning. He wants your faith to remain. Without those means there is no promise of faith. Substitutes won't work. Faith has to have what Jesus gives or it burns out and we are lost. God promises to work through the Word and through the Sacraments to strengthen and keep our faith. It is absolutely necessary that we constantly fill and surround ourselves with the Means of Grace if we want to be welcomed into the wedding the feast with lamps burning bright.

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. You are beautiful and radiant to Him because He has made you that way. He has taken away your sin, your ugliness and given you the beauty of His holiness. And it's His opinion that counts. 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 didn't want Him, He wants you. He loves you. He is coming back. He will bring you home. Be prepared. Read the Bible. Pray. Come to church to hear and receive your Savior as He prepares you by calling you to repentance and forgiving you, by strengthening you with His Body and Blood, by teaching you and exhorting you. He will prepare you that you may enter into the wedding feast with joy.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Jesus Christ.