

**The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, November 8, 2020**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

## **The Bridegroom Comes**

Matthew 25:1–13

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

*Eph 1:2*

Jesus said, **“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. . . . And while [the foolish virgins] were going to buy [oil for their lamps], the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. . . . Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour”** (vv 1, 10, 13).

**The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom** (v 1). When the bridegroom comes, he finds five wise virgins, the other five foolishly out shopping for oil. This, Jesus says, is what it *will be* like. For now, it’s like ten virgins—the Church on earth—left standing, sitting, waiting. Lamps in hand. Ten bored virgins. Ten anxious virgins. Ten ready-to-give-up virgins. The bridegroom delaying. The Church waiting, feeling a bit like a bride left at the altar; feeling a bit like an abandoned husband; feeling a bit like a widow pining for her deceased. Years pass. Where is He, this bridegroom of ours? The Old Testament Church, waiting for the Day of the Lord. The New Testament Church, waiting for the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why the delay? When will this silence be broken? Where is the cry:

“BEHOLD, THE BRIDEGROOM! COME OUT TO MEET HIM!”?

### I. Is He really coming back?

We’ve heard promises before and been disappointed. We’ve known the loneliness of waiting for someone who never returns. The broken-hearted bride who was abandoned. The children whose mother or father suddenly died and left them alone. The man whose close friend refuses to speak with him. We fear that it might happen again. Or perhaps we are the promise breaker, the liar, the adulterer. We know unfaithfulness from the inside. It’s so difficult to believe anyone, to trust anyone. It’s difficult even to believe our Lord’s words. We won’t be disappointed again, so we’re skeptical of every

promise, including this one. “The Second Coming?” we think. I’ll believe it when I see it. I hope it’s true, but it has been a long time, y’know.” The world, the devil, our own sinful nature create this doubt. Repent. Do not be deceived. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Yes, He is a man like us, yet without sin. He speaks like us, but His words are utterly true. He promises like we do, but He is ever faithful. We’ve heard and made such promises before. But we’ve never heard them promised by one like this: by a man who is also the good and gracious God. The kingdom of heaven *will be* like this parable. Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom, will come.

**As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept** (v 5). Ten tired virgins. Here. In these pews. Struggling to stay awake for even an hour. Like the disciples, sleeping when we should be watching. Worn out. Exhausted. Bodies failing. Some falling into the final sleep. Our loved ones, sleeping in their graves. Unable to be roused. Dead before our Lord’s return. But even the sleep of death can’t keep them, or us—if we should join them—from waking at the Bridegroom’s return. All—wise and foolish, living and dead—all are raised by the midnight cry. In Thessalonians, the Holy Spirit through St. Paul addresses the question of those who die before our Lord’s return: **“God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. . . . For 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”** (1 Thess 4:13, 16). We mourn, but with hope. Our grandparents, parents, children, beloved spouses—they won’t be left out when the bridegroom returns. Christ was raised. So shall our loved ones be, and we with them on the last day, at the cry:

“BEHOLD, THE BRIDEGROOM! COME OUT TO MEET HIM!”

II. “Ah,” we think, “I’ve got plenty of time!”

He will come like a thief in the night: suddenly; unexpectedly; without warning. How long will it be? We don’t know. It’s not a matter of arithmetic or algebra, not a number for us to figure out. Those who mark their calendars and announce the date will disappoint and be disappointed. An unknown day, an unknown hour. Month, year, millennium: all unknown. But don’t grow lazy. The day draws near. Soon, and if not soon, then now. Our Lord will come. He will come in His own time, not ours. Not by our votes, our plans, or our preparations. We can no more bring His return than the virgins could make the bridegroom appear. When will it strike midnight? If only we could watch the clock and count the ticks, like kids keeping themselves awake until their parents get back. But we can’t.

So here we are: Ten virgins in the church, waiting for the bridegroom. **Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps** (vv 2–4). How much oil is enough? How much faith do we need? If only we could measure it out! Not knowing when or how much, thinking there's plenty of time, we are tempted to say, "We'll get what we need later. No need to worry now. Tomorrow will be soon enough. Why bother today? Besides, I'm too busy. Eat, drink, and be merry. Repentance can wait." Placing the pleasure of the moment ahead of eternity. A foolish virgin, thinking to play in another's bed before the Bridegroom returns. Have we entertained such thoughts? As if to say, "I've got time. I can enjoy this sin today. No one needs to know that I'm flirting with someone besides my spouse, looking at filth, checking out the neighbor." In our secret struggle with sin, we think that we have time. Time before our Lord returns—time to put our messes right, time to fix what we've broken, time to make up for what we've done wrong.

But you don't have time. You can't afford to put this off. Confess your sin. Today. We can't control our Lord; we aren't masters of His schedule. We can't put Him off til tomorrow or manipulate our sin and unbelief around His coming, as if He were a houseguest whom we could schedule at our convenience. ("Saturday doesn't work, how about next week?") You can't pencil in a deathbed conversion. Repent. Nor can anyone else believe for you. There is no saint, no spouse, no friend to whom you can turn today or on the last day, saying "**Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out**" (v 8). They can't. Faith can't be borrowed, begged, or bought. It can't be wired from Western Union. Faith is a gift from God. The Holy Spirit, through God's word and the Holy Sacraments, creates faith. Even infants believe for themselves; they aren't saved by their parents' faith, but by their own. Then the Day of the Lord arrives, the midnight cry:

**"BEHOLD, THE BRIDEGROOM! COME OUT TO MEET HIM!"**

But we—we who are Christians, we who believe in Jesus, hearing that cry, we say:

III. Thank goodness!

Truly, I say to you, the bridegroom did come. Your sin has already been judged. Your punishment has already been paid. There on the cross by Jesus. So everything is now an anticipation of the Last Day. We hear the verdict of that day ahead of time. Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church, is here. He pronounces the verdict: "I forgive you. Your doubt; your unfaithfulness; your broken promises: all forgiven. I, Jesus the Bridegroom, take your sin. I all belongs to me now. And I give you, the Bride, the Church, Myself

and all My righteousness. I have made you pure and spotless. I have died for you. I have risen for you, so that you too might rise when the cry comes. Is your lamp running dry? Are you feeling empty? A smoldering wick I will not quench. Here is oil, oil overflowing. Here is my forgiveness. Go and sin no more." Don't fear the return of Christ. Don't dread the stroke of midnight. Our Lord provides you with what you need to meet him. Christ gives Himself to you. So you come out to meet the bridegroom with His own forgiveness. You come to meet Him with the faith He creates in you. The day draws near, thank God. You, dear Christian, are the wise virgin with the flask of oil that never diminishes. Weary and worn out with waiting, yes, but our Lord comes for you. The midnight cry brings relief, not fear: "Behold, the Bridegroom! Come to meet you. Enter into the marriage feast." This is the hour of salvation. To you the door is open. To you Jesus says, "I know you. Enter into my joy."

Now we have in part what awaits us in eternity. A little foretaste of the feast to keep us going, to keep us waiting, to keep us watching, to keep us faithful. Food for today and hope for tomorrow. On this altar is the marriage feast, poor though it looks, a slice of what is to come. The kingdom of heaven is here in our midst, for Christ is here. His body here, given for you. His blood here, shed for you. Eat, drink. His word here spoken to you. His forgiveness here filling your ears. Believe. The same kingdom that our Lord will bring finally, decisively, when He returns. It's already ours. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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*Revised from a sermon preached at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, for the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, November 9, 2008.*