

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. <sup>4</sup> The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

<sup>6</sup> “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

<sup>7</sup> “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

<sup>9</sup> “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

<sup>10</sup> “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

<sup>11</sup> “Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’

<sup>12</sup> “But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

<sup>13</sup> “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Chances are you’ve never heard of Philip Nicolai unless you’re in the habit of looking at the bottom of the hymnal page to see who wrote the hymn or the tune for a song. Philip Nicolai was the pastor who wrote the hymn we just sang—*Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying*. He wrote it at the time when 1300 people died from the bubonic plague in his area of Germany over the last half of the year 1597. It was a stressful time for the people and for him in particular. The song is an expression of Jesus’ parable before us this morning and a call for God’s people, pictured as wise maidens, to be ready to meet Jesus, the Bridegroom, who could come at any time. What an important time it was for a song like this! I suspect that God used that horrible disease both to capture the attention of people and cause them to look to him as their Savior. He also used that plague to call many to the wedding hall of heaven.

Philip Nicolai’s song—and more importantly, Jesus’ story of the 10 virgins—is intended to cause Christian people to watch for Jesus to return. It is an appropriate lesson for Saints Triumphant Sunday because on that Last Day, the saints of God—Christians—will receive the victory of eternal life that only comes by faith in Christ. But Jesus gets our attention with this parable of the 10 virgins and causes us to consider our answer to the question:

### **Are You Ready for Christ’s Return?**

- 1. Many who think they are ready are not (1-2 5-9, 11-12)**
- 2. You can be sure you are ready (3,4)**
- 3. You can joyfully watch (10, 13)**

Jesus says that this is a story about the kingdom of heaven. By that Jesus means God’s kingdom as it is here on earth, where he calls people to faith and rules in their hearts and lives. With this story, your Savior is encouraging you to listen closely and think about this deeply because while his message may give you great joy, there is also the possibility that it is a sobering wake up call for you.

This story is found within a couple chapters' worth of Jesus discussing the end of the world and he's talking about being prepared for that day when he will return. When you heard the words of this parable from Matthew 25, did you think it a little weird that Jesus would frame his return to this world in terms of a wedding? Maybe we shouldn't think that's so odd. God has often used this imagery with his people. Through the prophet Isaiah, he said, **As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you (Isaiah 62:5).** God's prophet, John the Baptist, said this: **'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'** **The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less (John 3:28-30).**

The wedding picture in this story includes the groom or the bridegroom, which is Jesus. The day of his arrival for the wedding is the Last Day when Christ will return. The virgins or maidens, we would call bridesmaids. They represent the people found in the earthly kingdom of God, people who are involved in the Church.

The particular wedding customs at Jesus' time were this: there was a religious ceremony called a betrothal. This legally bound a man and woman together. But there was a period of weeks or even months after that where they did not live together as husband and wife. A celebration would be planned where the groom would go to the house of the bride so that he could take her back to his home. The bridesmaids—the virgins—would go out in a festive procession with lamps lit to meet the groom as he approached the bride's home and they would escort him to the bride. Jesus story takes us to the bride's house where the girls are waiting for the call that the bride's groom is approaching. Obviously, preparation was key because you didn't know exactly when the groom would arrive.

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Jesus tells of five young women who were totally prepared to meet the groom and for the festive wedding celebration to commence. There were also five of them who were not prepared. To look at them, you would think they were all the same. All were carrying lamps, all were waiting. But there was something that was different but not noticeable. Five of them didn't fully prepare for the arrival of the groom. *"Come out to meet the bridegroom!"* The call went out, but the five wise virgins couldn't give their oil to the foolish ones who had not brought extra, so they had to run out at that moment for more. But you heard the story—it was too late. They weren't prepared and they weren't allowed into the wedding celebration.

Jesus reveals something here that God does address elsewhere—that there are many who think they are ready for Christ to return, but they are not. If you could look at every person who has their name on the membership list at our church or any other, they all look somewhat the same. They are people with jobs and hobbies and talents and friends and families. But even non-Christians know that not everyone who is part of a

church is actually a Christian. And this goes beyond the matter of hypocrites, who believe something other than what they say. Jesus is talking about people who think they are prepared, but they are not. That would include people who only attend church out of habit—they are merely a shell, with no living faith inside. It would include those who neglect Bible reading, who do not regularly hear God's Word and receive the Lord's Supper. If faith was there at some point, they have not maintained and replenished it with the Means of Grace.

This is where it could be a sobering wake-up call for you. If you are neglecting God's Word at home or are almost never in worship or have little interest in the Sacrament—if you're not really maintaining your faith in these ways OR you are only habitually going through the motions of "church," you may be the unwise virgin. And in your defense, don't say, "*I know that Jesus died on the cross for my sin*" and think that saves you. The devil knows what Jesus did (James 2:19). Knowing the facts is not the same thing as *trusting* in what Jesus has done and following him. Faith is trusting and following and preparing for the bridegroom to return.

God has given you faith; you're standing there among the collection of Christians holding the lit lamp. But if you are not always preparing, doing the things that keep that flame alive, it will eventually go out—and it may go out prior to Christ's return. His return will come suddenly and at that point, it will be too late to prepare. The door to heaven will be closed and the unprepared person will be on the outside of heaven, separated from God eternally. Don't make the mistake that some do, who, like the unprepared bridesmaids, thought they were ready, but were not really prepared.

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Though tough to admit to yourself and God, that may be where you're at; you haven't been preparing. The good news is that Jesus tells us this story so that you can be prepared! It is possible to be sure that you are ready for Christ's return! And it may be that you actually are prepared. Whichever position we find ourselves in today, there is encouragement to be found in Jesus' story.

Jesus' includes five young women to serve as our role models. They were prepared. Not only did they have their lamps lit, they had extra oil with them so that their light could be maintained until the bridegroom arrived. You and I can be prepared by doing the things God would have us do and using what he has given us to keep the light of our faith shining all the way until Jesus returns to take us into heaven, to the eternal celebration of the marriage of Jesus and his Bride, the Church.

Just as the wise bridesmaids could not share their oil with the foolish girls, no one can give faith to another person. A wife cannot give faith to her husband. You can't give faith to a friend. A parent can't give faith to a child. Faith is personal and preparation for Christ's return is something you have to do yourself.

And you know the gifts God has given you to do that. Bibles are plentiful. If you don't have one at home and you don't have a way to get one, I'll give you one. The Bible is the only way God speaks to us today. Let him talk to you. Let him comfort you. Let him encourage you. Let him guide you. A strong faith comes from hearing God speak. It is the most important reason we come together for worship also. So you don't want to be missing church unless you have to. And it is here that you receive the comfort of forgiveness and strength of faith found in the Lord's Supper. Like the five wise virgins standing together, prepared for the bridegroom, the friendships among God's people offer support and encouragement as we await Christ's return.

We would do well to remember that none of us is perfect and our preparation is not perfect. But the prepared Christian is the one who finds forgiveness in their Savior. They repent of their sins and look to Jesus and his sacrifice for sin on the cross. They have a confidence in Christ and what he did for them because God promises that their forgiveness is certain. They are prepared because they trust in that. It gives them a joy that nothing else can give them. You can be prepared like this. God has given you everything you need to be like the wise bridesmaids.

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And if you are prepared like them, you can look forward with joy to the Church's Bridegroom returning! Your joy comes from being prepared. And this is not some inappropriate pride and joy in your work of preparation. This is a joy that comes from knowing that Jesus has paid for your sin...that you are forgiven...that you are living with that trust in Christ which shows itself in your life. You are not sinless and your works will not save you, but you are forgiven, you are prepared, and so you joyfully watch for Christ to return.

This is one of those parables to which Jesus provides the explanation. After the story, he says, **"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."** You and I do not know when Jesus will return to call the saints of God—the people he has made holy—to their eternal home. It is imperative then that we remain prepared and that we keep watching. Our *preparation* is joyful because we love the God who loved us first. We live to express our thanks and our love to him. And our *watching* is joyful because when Jesus returns, it will be to give us the goal of our faith—heaven.

The eternal celebration will begin on that day as we join all those who have persevered to the end, who remained constant in their preparation and were ready when the moment came. The struggle that is our preparation will be over; we will rest from that work. The joy of the saints of God all being together will be amazing—think of seeing once again your friends and loved ones who have died in faith. But even greater than that will be the joy of seeing our Savior face-to-face and being in the presence of the almighty and loving God. Wedding receptions are fun, but they are nothing compared the joy we will have at the wedding supper of the Lamb, as the book of Revelation calls it. May God bless you as you continue or renew or begin your preparation for that great, eternal celebration ushered in when the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, returns for you. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.