

“Keep Watch”

How could they be so foolish? How could they be so unprepared? Have you ever felt that way about someone you knew? Have you maybe found yourself in a situation where you felt that way about yourself? Maybe you were at the beach when you realized that you didn't have any sunscreen. Maybe you were ready to play basketball only to find that the ball was flat, and you didn't have anything with which to pump it up. Perhaps you were all set for the big road trip...except...you better fill up with gas before you leave.

You probably know that things like these happen, and maybe they have happened to you. Maybe they have happened to people close to you. Maybe your only experience with something like this is hearing about it secondhand. In any case, you understand the appraisal: it is foolish to be so unprepared. It is foolish to have neglected such important details.

That is the foolishness that we find in the five virgins in Jesus' story. How could they be so foolish? How could they be so unprepared? Who brings a lamp but doesn't have any oil? Well, in the story, it was half of the virgins who had gathered to wait.

Of course, this whole story that Jesus told is pretty foreign from our own experience. It was a story true to his time and his culture. Weddings traditions and protocol have changed pretty drastically since then. Today, a couple in love makes a promise to each other that they plan to get married, that is, they get engaged. And then, some time later, they come together for a special church service or ceremony at which their marriage is made official. That very day and night, they begin their lives together as husband and wife, maybe with some celebrating with friends and family. In Jesus' time, first the marriage was arranged or determined, and then there would have been a ceremony at which the husband and wife would be pledged to each other. But the life as husband and wife didn't start right away. Some time later came the big event. The groom would go to the house of his wife in order to bring her with him to their new home. This event would be met with celebration involving family and friends, the wedding banquet.

That's what Jesus describes in his story. The virgins of the story are waiting for the groom so that they can join in the procession and in the celebration. He is going to come that very night, but it takes longer than anticipated. And so they wait until late in the night when they finally realize that he has gotten there. Now it is time for them to head out and to join in the banquet. But that is when the foolishness become obvious. The five virgins have no oil to light their lamps, and the wise virgins don't have enough for everybody. The five foolish virgins head as fast as they can to the sellers of oil, but they are too late. The banquet has started without them, and they are locked out.

But Jesus is telling more than a story about a wedding banquet. His story is about important spiritual matters. He even starts his story by explaining, **“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like...”** This is a parable. Jesus compares a story that his hearers would know something about to something that they wouldn't. He uses the one to explain and describe the other. And the “at that time” of this particular parable is the last day, the Judgment Day. And what Jesus wants us to learn from this story is summed up very simply: keep watch.

Be like the wise virgins, not like the foolish virgins. Be ready when the bridegroom shows up. Have oil in your lamp. What does that mean to us? Well, what is it that makes us ready for Jesus to return to earth on Judgment Day? It is a true and living faith, worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and fed and nourished by his gospel. The foolish virgins look just like the wise on the outside. They have lamps. They sit and wait for the bridegroom. But when he comes, they have no oil. Their lamps are worthless. In terms of application, there are people who seem on the outside like they are Christians. They go through all of the motions, and even show up to church regularly. But their spiritual lives are empty, and there is no true faith. They will be left out.

In this entire section of Matthew, Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the end times. He's explained to them how to recognize the signs that the end times are coming. He's told them what would happen when he

returns, that is, that he will judge the living and the dead. He wants them to understand the importance of this truth. He wants them to remember how important it is to keep watch, and so he shares this and other parables to drive home the point.

Jesus is going to return. We confessed it today in the Nicene Creed, that he will come in glory to judge the living and the dead. He wants us to be ready. He has made us ready. He has snatched us from the darkness of our sins that previously doomed us to hell. He has promised that heaven is ours because of his life, his death, and his rising to life again. His judgment will be – we heard about this at length last Sunday—his judgment will be whether we have believed in him and therefore have been covered over by his righteousness and holiness. It is either that or we have rejected him. We will be judged in that case on the merits of our own works, and we will be condemned.

And it doesn't matter whether we've gone through the motions. It doesn't matter what other people think of us. It doesn't matter in and of itself how many times we have gone to church or how much we have put into the offering plate. All that matters is that Jesus has sent his Holy Spirit into our hearts. He has turned us away from ourselves and toward his love and mercy, toward his perfection and his holiness.

Jesus has made us ready, and now he wants us to keep watch.

There will come a point when it is too late to find oil for our lamps. There will come a time when we can no longer find a loving God and rescue from our sins. By the time the foolish virgins discovered how foolish they had been, it was too late. Jesus will return, and for all who have not believed in him already, it will be too late. No one will be able to fill their lamp with someone else's oil. They will simply be locked out of the wedding banquet.

That's why we take every opportunity that we have to run to God's Word. That's why we cherish the supper where we receive the true body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. That's why we treasure the waters of our baptisms that washed away our sins and adopted us into God's own family.

There are too many people who have, for one reason or another, stopped cherishing and treasuring these things. They have allowed other cares and concerns to crowd out their church attendance and Bible study and devotional life. Or they are going through the motions, but these matters never really touch their hearts. And some may very well think that they'll get back to God's Word at some point. They will start attending church again some day. They will start paying attention to what God has to say to them and their lives when they are ready.

But when will that be? Will it be before an accident that unexpectedly cuts that time short? Will it be before Jesus comes back? Will it be before it is too late? Jesus says: **"Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'"**

This is the urgency with which Christ begs and pleads and implores you: keep watch. You do not know the day. You do not know the hour. When you discover the day and the hour, then it will be too late.

So he doesn't invite you to go through the motions. He invites you to be fed and nourished by his holy Word. He invites you to receive his body broken for you and his blood shed for you. He invites you to see your sins washed away in the flood waters of baptism. He invites you to discover over and over again that you can't be responsible or wise on your own, but that with Jesus Christ you are wise. With him you are prepared for everything and anything.

Today is Saints Triumphant Sunday in our Church Year. Jesus' story is about a banquet. It is about your invitation to the wedding supper of the lamb, the perfect fulfillment of all of God's greatest plans for you and for all his people. It is about seeing one day not a vision of heaven, but the real thing, the real joy, the real satisfaction and happiness, the overwhelming joy of living with God forever and praising his holy name. You are a saint right now, made holy in the blood of the lamb. God has filled your lamp with oil, and he invites you to keep watch for that blessed day.

The Text: Matthew 25:1–13 (NIV)

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

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

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

⁹ “ ‘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.’

¹⁰ “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.

¹¹ “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

¹² “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

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