

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 24  
November 12, 2023  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
**Keep watch!**

—Matthew 25:1-13

We've all been there. The light at the intersection turns green, but the car in front of you doesn't move. What do you do? You are a patient person, so you wait patiently, but the car still doesn't move. You don't want people to think you're from California, so you wait patiently some more. Finally you give just a light tap on your horn, and at last the person in the car in front of you looks up and moves out. The person was texting. They were oblivious to their surroundings, including to the green traffic light in front of them. I would like to say in self-righteous pride that the person at the front of the intersection couldn't ever be me, but the number of times my wife has gently reminded me, "Green light!" would tell a different story.

Keep watch! Stay alert! Pay attention! You snooze, you lose. We know the saying. If you're not alert to circumstances and surroundings, you'll miss out on what's going around you. It could be a financial opportunity: Buy now to get the best price before it's gone. Seize the moment to sell while the market is hot. It could be an experience opportunity: Act now to be part of a trip of a lifetime. Try out now for the sports team or the game show. Or it could just be a green light: Pay attention, so you don't keep other people waiting. But if you are oblivious and caught unprepared, the moment, the opportunity will pass you by.

We are in the time in between. We are waiting for Jesus' return. It could happen at any moment: the heavens are pulled back, the Lord Jesus appears on the clouds with all his mighty angels, the dead are raised, and everyone is summoned to stand before him. Boom! Just like that it's Judgment Day. It could happen at any moment, or it could be delayed many more years. After all, it's been 2,000 years already, what's a little more time? God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. So perhaps Jesus delays his return. But the day *is coming!* And whenever it comes, we want to be ready to meet Jesus, our Bridegroom.

Nothing illustrates that sobering point more clearly than Jesus' parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. Jesus says: *At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise.* First of all, let's establish who's who here. The returning Bridegroom is, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom of the church, who is coming to take his faithful people home to the eternal wedding banquet in heaven. The five wise virgins represent believers—believers who are waiting expectantly and faithfully for their Lord. The five foolish virgins represent whom? Some will say, "unbelievers." That's incorrect! The five foolish virgins also represent believers. Jesus is not talking here about pagans bowing down to stone idols. This isn't about heathens in far-off lands who haven't heard about Jesus the Bridegroom. No, these five foolish virgins are also waiting for the return of the Bridegroom. They know he's coming back. But when he finally returns, they find themselves unprepared to meet him. One might say that at that point they're not believers anymore, but the point is at the beginning they were waiting for Jesus' return. Let's start with this understanding: in this parable Jesus is speaking to believers about believers.

But something happened in the meantime. The Bridegroom delayed his return. Jesus, who says to his people, "Behold, I am coming soon!" (Revelation 22:12) didn't come back soon enough for the five foolish virgins. Jesus tells us what the difference is between the wise and the foolish: *When the foolish ones took their lamps, they did not take any oil with them; but the wise took oil in their containers with their lamps. While the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.'* When the time came, some were ready, and others weren't. Finally this whole parable has one point: Keep watch! Persevere until the end. Be ready when Jesus comes.

Being ready to meet Jesus starts with appreciating a very simple truth: You have been called to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the Savior, a Christian. There is no higher calling! It doesn't matter what your background is, what sins you have committed. You have been washed, you have been cleansed. You have been justified, declared righteous and forgiven in Jesus. The Son of God has given you the most priceless treasure: the gift of eternal life, immortality. Cherish who you are in Christ! Revel in what it means to be a child of God! The gates of heaven are open to you. A joyful reunion with your loved ones who have died in the faith is waiting for you. An eternity with Jesus in unimaginable, glorious perfection is what God has planned for you. Please do not take for granted what you have been given in Jesus. Do not despise it or treat it lightly. As a Christian you are not in love with this life or this world or the things of this world; you are waiting for something better when Jesus comes. As a child of God you are not walking in the darkness; you are not impenitent, walking in the darkness of deliberate sin. As a follower of Jesus you want to know the mind of Jesus, you want to be like Jesus, you want to be closer and closer every day to Jesus. That's why you love

the Word of God: because you love Jesus, and you love to hear his voice. That's why you love to worship in God's house: because you can't get enough time with Jesus, worshiping, praying, praising, singing to him. That's why you are hungry for Holy Communion: because you crave that closeness with him and with your fellow Christians, because more than the shiny stuff all around, you hunger and thirst for righteousness, for refreshment, for grace, for healing, for that intimate, special taste of God's love in his Holy Supper.

Do you ever watch old movies or television shows? (By "old" I mean something before around 1980 or so.) If you ever watch old shows and you see people riding around in cars, you'll notice that they're often not wearing seat belts. That's partly because a lot of older cars didn't *have* seat belts, and partly because seat belt usage was not required by law. When they started passing seat belt laws across the country, Arizona was one of the last states to require vehicle occupants to wear seat belts; Arizona didn't pass a law making seat belt usage mandatory until 1991. That's because Arizona had a ruggedly independent, "wild west" spirit. Nobody's going to tell *us* what to do! When encouraged to wear seat belts people actually said, "I don't need to wear a seat belt! When I see an accident about to happen, *then* I can buckle my seat belt, or I'll just slide out of the way." You're thinking, "Whaaaat? That's absurd." But people actually said that; I heard people say that with my own ears back in the day. Obviously, it doesn't work that way.

Or here's another question: How many of you have heard a sonic boom? When I was growing up in semi-rural Arizona, not far from military operations areas, sonic booms were quite common. When a fighter jet exceeds the speed of sound, it creates a powerful shock wave that radiates out over a large area. A sonic boom rattles windows at the least and can do a lot more damage; that's why jets are not supposed to go supersonic around populated areas. Here's the thing about a sonic boom: You never hear it coming. You never hear the airplane before the sonic boom. The supersonic plane is traveling ahead of the sound it creates. Out of nowhere you hear "Ka-boom!" and only then can hear the sound of the jet traveling away from you.

When Jesus returns, it's going to be instantaneous, with all the suddenness of a sonic boom. In a flash, in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, the Bridegroom returns, and that's it. Judgment Day is here. There are those who think, "When I see Jesus coming in the clouds, *then* I'll repent of my sins and get ready to meet him. When the doctor tells me I have cancer, *then* I'll start getting ready for eternity, start reading the Bible, going to church. *Then* I'll take faith seriously." That, my friends, is a very dangerous game to play—as the five foolish virgins in Jesus' parable tragically learned. When the Bridegroom suddenly appeared, they weren't ready. Their oil was gone, the lamp of faith had gone out. And there was no way to light it again.

I don't know if you picked up on it when pastor was reading the Gospel, but there is one little phrase here in Matthew 25 that is quite terrifying. It says in verse 10, "And the door was shut." Did you catch that? The people on the outside pounded on the door and called out, "Lord, Lord, let us in," but the door was shut. "I don't know you," came the reply from inside. When the Bridegroom comes and takes his waiting people inside to the wedding feast and the door is shut, that's it. There is no second chance. There is no other way in, no back door. There is no "Okay, I missed this green light at the intersection because I was busy texting, but I'll catch the next one." No, the door was shut. When the opportunity is lost it is lost forever. And now there is only outer darkness for all eternity, weeping and gnashing of teeth forever. If we are unprepared to meet Jesus and miss the invitation to heaven, the only alternative is hell. The door to heaven is shut, never to be opened again. All that's left then is a night of despair, outer darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth—even for those who had once waited so eagerly for the Bridegroom, but at his arrival were unprepared to meet him.

This is a serious warning from our Savior, but there is also some wonderfully comforting gospel in this text. Fellow Christians, the Bridegroom is coming! Jesus is coming to take you home to him. There is a 100% chance that you will leave this world of sin and pain, either when Jesus returns, or when you die. And then comes heaven. Sometimes it's hard to think about heaven when we're living here in our own little paradise, but the truth is, all the trinkets and the shiny baubles and the delights and the pleasures of this world have nothing to compare with eternity purchased for you in heaven with Jesus' own blood. The Savior who is returning to take you with him is the Conqueror of sin and death, the victory over Satan, the one who brings life and immortality. He wants you to join him in glory, and he is coming for you, so that you can be with him forever!

It's also comforting to remember that it is God himself who has made you prepared and ready to meet him. You are in Christ because that's what God has made you to be. You have been set apart as holy vessels devoted to the Lord God. God himself has made you ready to meet the bridegroom, as he has taken off the rags of your own righteousness and dressed you in the beautiful garments of Christ. You are prepared to meet him, not because of what you have done for him, but because his work for you is perfectly complete. Your sins are forgiven because Jesus died for you, and he is your Savior who wants you to be with him forever.

So you, the bride of Christ, his holy Church, keep watch for the coming of the Bridegroom, who says, "I am coming soon." Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen.