

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Saints Triumphant  
November 15, 2020  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
**Keep the lamp of faith burning brightly**

—Matthew 25:1-13

The return of Jesus Christ on Judgment Day is going to be the greatest event since the creation of the world. The descriptions the Bible gives of what that day is going to be like defy our comprehension. We cannot fully imagine what Judgment Day is going to be like when the Lord Jesus returns with his holy ones. When those who have been dead are called from their graves. When dust and ashes are reformed into the bodies of those long departed and the breath of life enters them. When this world is purified with fire and remade in glory and perfection. When those who are unprepared to meet the King of kings must cower before his majesty before they enter the lake of eternal fire. When those who are waiting to meet Jesus, anticipating his return and ready for his coming are invited to join Christ in his glory. *That* is going to be a party the likes of which has never been seen before! The wedding feast of the Lamb. The glorious victory celebration of our God and Savior, who bared his holy arm and secured the victory over sin, evil, Satan, all the minions of hell. What God has planned for those love him is so inconceivably awesome we can't even wrap our minds around it. But as God's people that's what we are looking forward to, and all God's saints share in God's triumph.

The question is: When will Jesus return? When will the dawn of eternity break? When will we be ushered into the presence of our King? When will the Bridegroom call us to the wedding feast? The day has been set by God, and God is not slow in keeping his promises, but to us it might seem slow. Nearly 2,000 years have passed since Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, and that same Jesus whom the disciples watched ascend into heaven has not yet returned. Meanwhile the world continues. Evil abounds. Technology improves, yet the human race descends into greater debauchery and vice. The love of many grows cold. Our entire lives are a battle fought against sin and temptation, and the only hope we have of persevering to the end is to keep the lamp of faith burning brightly, trusting, watching, waiting for Jesus to return.

Jesus' parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 illustrates this sobering point. 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, 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 about pagans worshiping the sun god here; 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 the end they're not believers anymore, but the point is at the beginning they were waiting for Jesus' return.

But something happened in the meantime: The Bridegroom delayed his return. Jesus, who tells us, "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: *The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, our lamps are going out." "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."* The wise virgins took extra oil to keep their lamps burning. The wise were prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom. The foolish virgins did not take with them the necessary resources to keep their lamps burning, so that the long-expected arrival of the Bridegroom found them unprepared.

*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.* Those must be some of the most chilling and ominous words in all of Scripture: *And the door was shut.* One short sentence with eternal consequences. The door to the wedding banquet, the door to heaven, the door to the presence of God was shut. It makes me think of how God shut the door to Noah's ark, and when the deluge came upon the earth the perishing people begged and pleaded and pounded on that door, but it was closed, and all they could do was perish in the flood. It makes me think of

the medieval writer Dante's book *Inferno*, in which he describes a sign over the gates of hell that reads, "Despair all who enter here." Outside, the foolish cry, "*Sir! Sir! Open the door for us!*" But the Bridegroom replies, "*I tell you the truth, I don't know you.*" What horrifying words Jesus uses in his parable today: *And the door was shut*. Never to be reopened again. No other chance of redemption. Only 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.

Do you think that the imminent return of Christ is on most people's radar today? Even we Christians are often oblivious to the reality that at any moment the Lord could pull back the curtain of the heavens and appear with all his holy ones to judge the living and the dead. Most Christians today take for granted that we're going to grow up and get an education; find that special someone to marry; work hard for several years and save up for retirement; retire and enjoy some leisure; and then, sometime beyond the ripe old age of 96 years we might fall asleep and move on from this life. The whole idea that the world could end at any moment just doesn't factor into most plans. It is a very good thing to work hard, provide for our families, get a good education, and save up and plan so that we don't become a burden upon society. But when that becomes the entire focus of our lives, we fall prey to exactly the kind of lack of watchfulness and lack of preparedness that Jesus is talking about here. The biggest threat to our being prepared is not that we wake up one day and think the Bible isn't true; it's that we get so caught up in our day-to-day that we think the Bible doesn't matter. Jesus is talking to believers when he says in Luke, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap" (Luke 21:34). *Keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour.*

Keep the lamp of faith burning brightly! The lamp of faith in our hearts will continue burning brightly only as long as it is fed with a constant supply of fuel. We know where faith comes from; we say it often: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Our faith needs a steady diet of God's precious word to continue to burn brightly. Our Lord invites us again and again to stand before his cross in humility and repentance and there to see our salvation earned by Jesus. Jesus shows us the price of our sins and the extent of his eternal love for us sinners. The good news points us to the empty tomb, where Jesus rose victorious on Easter Sunday. Our faith thrives on that precious message: "Your sins are forgiven! Jesus has done it all. He has won the victory. Be at peace!"

Today we celebrate Saints Triumphant. These are brothers and sisters in Christ who worshiped with us in church, ate and drank with us at the Lord's Table, asked questions and joined in the discussions in Bible study. Like us they watched and waited and hoped for the day when the Lord would call them home. They fought the good fight. They kept the faith. Now they have finished their race. They were faithful to the point of death, and they received the crown of life. Soon we will join them.

Today you belong to Jesus. You are his, washed and ready. And you continue to be prepared to meet him, as you continue watching for your Savior's return. When you look beyond the corruption of this life and look forward to the day when you will be set free from this flesh, delivered from this world, saved from this corrupt generation, when you will receive the full consummation of the inheritance that is promised and secured for you by Jesus—then you continue to be prepared to meet him. When every day is for you a day of repentance and confession and clinging to Jesus for mercy that is fresh and new every morning and for forgiveness that brings peace every night—then you continue to be prepared to meet him. When you crave Holy Communion, because there you find the seal and pledge of God's forgiveness—then you continue to be prepared to meet him. When the spoken absolution lifts the burden of your sins, when the benediction gives you power to go in the grace and power of the Lord—then you continue to be prepared to meet the Bridegroom, who says, "Behold, I am coming soon!"

Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come! Amen.