

**THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR: PARABLE OF THE LAMPS:
Are You Ready to Wait? *Matthew 25:1-13*:**

There used to be a commercial on television that was run by one of the major oil companies. It was about an auto mechanic who handed over a huge repair bill to a customer that had not changed his oil on a regular basis. His line was, "**Pay me now or pay me later.**" The same can be said for our state of spiritual readiness. The five maidens who did not fill their lamps were not ready when the bridegroom returned. It was too late to buy oil. And if the others who had filled their lamps had shared, no one would have been ready. We can put it off, make no plans and find ourselves, like the five maidens, shut out of God's kingdom, or we can keep our lives in a constant state of readiness, prepared for anything that comes our way.

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1789. One day, the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought."

And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet. — Matthew 25:10

Have you ever noticed how waiting — waiting for something or someone — can be either wonderful or dreadful? To a large degree the difference is determined by what you are waiting for. Waiting for your bride to come down the aisle of the church can be wonderful. Waiting to learn if your loved one has cancer can be dreadful. Waiting at the airport to meet your best friend can be wonderful; waiting for a root canal can be dreadful.

Waiting for a promotion — wonderful; waiting to see if you'll lose your job due to corporate downsizing — dreadful; and waiting to purchase your dream house — wonderful; waiting to be audited by the IRS is absolutely dreadful.

As you probably know, there is a lot of waiting that takes place in the church, and I am not talking about waiting for the sermon to be over! Our waiting is much more meaningful than that —

- We wait for a new heaven and a new earth.
- We wait for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, as we pray in the words of the Lord's Prayer.
- When we celebrate Holy Communion we say that we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again... and we are waiting for that day to come.
- When we say the Apostles' Creed we affirm our belief in the one who will come to judge the living and the dead.

Much of our waiting, therefore, is waiting for Christ to return to earth, something that the church calls the second coming. In one of his books, Marcus Borg points out that expectation about the second coming has been a part of Christian tradition since the very beginning. "Of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 refer to the second coming."

But what will it be like? Will it be a time of wonder or of dread?

It is true waiting for Christ to return can be difficult. After all, we Christians have been waiting for 2,000 years and his return seems no more imminent today than it did way back when. In fact, the longer the delay, the easier it is to lose hope that he will ever return at all. Edmund Steimle, a Lutheran minister, once wrote about Christ's delayed return in these words:

On the roof of the Riverside Church in New York is the figure of the angel Gabriel, his horn lifted to his mouth ready to give out a mighty blast to announce the second coming of our Lord in glory. Day after day he stands ready. Warmed by the summer sun, frozen by winter sleet, year after year goes by, but there is no mighty blast, not even a tentative toot.

“No mighty blast to announce the second coming in glory,” writes Steimle, “not even a tentative toot.” Instead, the sounds we hear most often are the discouraging shouts of the newspaper headlines:

- College student abducted late at night. Police discover her body several weeks
- Racial tensions erupt following the shooting of a black man by a white police officer.
- Fighting between Israel and Palestine escalates following Israel’s decision to close off access to the temple mount.

With news stories such as these and more, it’s pretty easy to lose heart, grow discouraged, and give up hope. We may pray, “Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven,” but in spite of our well-meaning prayers, God’s kingdom seems no closer today than it did yesterday or last month or last year. No wonder we are tempted to toss in the towel, give up our hope for a better tomorrow, and call it quits.

But the New Testament won’t let us do that and in its own prophetic way urges us to believe that “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again,” as we say in our Communion liturgy. The challenge we face is how to live our lives in the meantime. And that brings us to the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids that we hear today!

It’s one of several parables about the return of Christ, which the gospel writer Matthew tells us one right after the next. Some New Testament parables extol the virtue of watchfulness saying: “Keep alert, for you do not know the day or hour when Christ will return.” But this parable takes a different tack, urging us to be ready — not so much ready for his return but ready to wait — assuming his return will be delayed. The foolish bridesmaids are chastised not because they fail to watch and not because they fall asleep — all of them fall asleep, the wise as well as the foolish. Rather, they are chastised because they did not bring enough lamp oil to keep their lamps burning during the bridegroom’s delay.

Like a number of Jesus’ parables, this one is best understood allegorically — things in the story represent other things. For example: the wedding banquet is a symbol for the kingdom of God, the bridegroom is clearly Jesus, and the bridegroom’s midnight arrival suggests that the messiah will return at an unexpected time. But what does the oil symbolize? In the opinion of Professor Tom Long, the wise bridesmaids who brought with them extra oil “... represent those Christians who keep on doing the will of God even when the kingdom is delayed.” They keep their lamps burning even though the bridegroom is delayed in returning. *As Jesus put it earlier in Matthew’s gospel, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:15).*

So how do we do that? We do it by following the teachings that Jesus laid out earlier in the gospel story, especially those from the Sermon on the Mount. For example, we do it by embracing the future that Jesus imagines in his beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

In short, we become the wise bridesmaids when we wait for Christ by living the kind of lives he, through his teachings, encourages us to live — letting our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to God who is in heaven. **Amen.**