

Rev. Lynne Ogren
November 8, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Matthew 25:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This week Eric and I said goodbye to our son and daughter-in-law after they came to see us. Yes, it was a risk in the midst of a pandemic, but hey took COVID tests before leaving home and we kept our social circle small while they were here. And as our active case numbers have increased, we decided not to gather with them and our daughter's family for Christmas. This is our year in the alternate schedule we share with both sets of in-law families, so our goodbye was even more precious this time.

Whenever we have been with family before and then gone our separate ways, it was easier to leave when we knew the next time we would be together. "See you at Christmas!" "See you this summer!" Those are easier farewells than, "I wonder when we'll see you again."

We are coming to the end of Matthew's gospel, and Jesus is preparing his followers for the day beyond his death, resurrection, and ascension. In this parable, he implies that he will return, but in the last verse he says that they will "know neither the day nor the hour."

This gospel was written about 40 years after Jesus' life on earth, and the promise of his return was assumed to be imminent. But, like Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, a generation is a long time to wait. And here we are, thousands of years later, still waiting. Or are we?

The ten bridesmaids were all waiting for the bridegroom—an allegory for Christ—and all ten of them fell asleep while they were waiting. When they received a "wake-up call" with a shout at midnight, some were ready with oil in their lamps for the wedding processional. And some were running out.

We all have wake-up calls when something snaps us out of our lazy ways of thinking or living to pay attention again. I remember attending the funeral of a man who was an accountant, and learning that, as much as he worked with his clients to get their finances in order, he had failed to do the same for his own family, and his widow was left with a financial mess to figure out. This woke me up at the time to get our wills in order.

As this pandemic season has gone on for longer than any of us hoped, it is easy to become complacent with our hand washing and keeping our distance. But I have heard a wake up call each time I learned that someone I know tested positive and they are struggling to breathe, especially those who have been hospitalized.

What might it mean to be ready for the coming of our bridegroom, for the return of Christ? After so many generations of waiting, it's easy to get sleepy about this promise Jesus makes. There are some Christian denominations that put a great deal of emphasis on being ready for Christ's return at the end of time. Some have even tried to calculate when it will happen, even when Jesus says we won't know the day or the hour.

What if Christ's return isn't a one and done event in the future? We claim in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine. We pray mealtime prayers that invite Jesus to be our guest. Perhaps Jesus is calling us to be ready to meet him

on any given day. How can we keep from becoming drowsy and missing out when he does show up?

The bridesmaids needed oil in their lamps to keep them lit. The same is true for us in our lives of faith. The flame of faith is the ways we shine the light on our Savior, to draw attention to Jesus Christ as the bridesmaids do in the wedding processional.

We use the verse from Matthew, chapter 5, in our baptismal liturgy when we give the newly baptized a candle: "Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

The light of faith burns in us, both to help us see the presence of Christ in our daily lives, and to guide others to him. Our faith is replenished through worship, prayer, the reading of scripture, and in fellowship with other people of faith.

It's hard to know how people are engaging in worship these days. Some of you are here, and some are watching—and hopefully participating—at home. I can imagine that if I were not here leading worship, it would be easy to let that practice slide.

In worship we refuel for the week ahead. We are refreshed with words of grace and forgiveness. We are fed with Christ himself. We place our trust in God's power to hear the cries of our hearts and to act in places of brokenness and despair. And we hear again the call to carry the light of Christ's love into the world of our daily lives.

The whole month of November often takes on a theme of thanksgiving, especially on social media. The last Home Faith activity our confirmation youth were given was to keep a gratitude journal. This month I am also posting a daily comment on Facebook on where I am finding generosity—or abundance—each day.

These daily disciplines of being watchful for the presence of Christ, often in unexpected ways, reawakens our faithful waiting.

The challenge in this parable is the act of judgment by the bridegroom. We want those five bridesmaids who have plenty of oil to share with the others. We want the bridegroom to let into the banquet the ones who missed out. This is an uncomfortable aspect of this teaching.

Notice that it is the bridegroom, it is Christ, who serves as the judge. We profess this in our creeds, "I believe in Jesus Christ...who will come to judge the living and the dead."

The determination of judgement is not ours to make. And yet, even we wait for Christ's return in the fullness of God's time, we believe that Christ comes to be with us again and again. Then, both his judgment and his mercy come to us, day by day. Every day, every moment, every wake-up call, brings with it a new possibility to greet Christ and to shine our light to bring glory to him.

Wake up, brothers and sisters! Be ready for the coming of the Savior!
Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Longing for Christ's reign to come among us, we pray for the outpouring of God's power on the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

Holy God, rouse us to deep praise as we gather for worship. Enliven our worship with sincere and heartfelt song. Sustain the work of all church musicians and artists who lead us in praise and prayer. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Holy Creator, surprise and delight us with the beauty of the world you have made. Bless the work of landscapers, architects, and artists whose work invites us into harmonious living with your creation. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Holy Sovereign, grant that all newly elected officials of government will work faithfully for the common good. Give them wisdom, honesty, and humility. Illumine their convictions with a spirit of cooperation. Continue to guide our election process. Open the hearts of Americans to one another so that all would work for and serve the communities in which we live. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Holy Protector, bless the observance of Veterans Day. Bring peace to areas of conflict and keep safe the military who serve in harm's way. Give to all the armed forces a dedication to defend the common good. Heal the wounds, both physical and emotional, experienced by active and retired service members. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Holy Healer, bring health and wholeness to those who are sick, those who live with chronic pain, and the thousands who daily contract COVID-19. Console those who feel lonely or abandoned. Uphold medical care workers. We pray especially for those listed in our bulletin today and those we name before you. . . Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Holy and Immortal One, we pray in thanksgiving for the lives of all who have died. May their lives and examples of faith inspire us to build up your kingdom, as we wait in anticipation of Christ's return. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Receive our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, until that day when you gather all creation around your throne where you will reign forever and ever.
Amen.