

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost 2020

Amos 5:18-24

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

Ready or not, here I come. Those are words that you hear after the kid who is “it” stops counting. Even as children, we knew what they meant. If you are not ready, too bad, so sad. If you weren’t ready by that point you had a very good chance of being “it” for the next round. The kid who was “it” had done his job. He counted nice and loud for everyone to hear. In fact, everybody agreed what number whoever was “it” had to count to; fifty or a hundred. Nobody ever heard the kid that was “it” say: “I’m almost done counting, so y’all better git hid right quick, cause, seriously, you only have a few more seconds so this is your last warning – I mean it.” No, no, no; in my neighborhood you counted the last ten seconds super-fast and then spit out the words “ready or not, here I come” and hustled off to find the sad sack who couldn’t figure out where to hide. “Ready or not, here I come.” That’s as much warning as you got.

It’s not a game of kick the can or hide and seek that is in view this morning, but a wedding. But the end of the parable is like the beginning of a children’s game: “ready or not, here I come.” What the Lord Christ presents in the parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins is just a tad bit more serious than that time you couldn’t decide whether to hide behind Mr. Johnson’s pick-up or behind the oak tree in Mrs. Carlson’s side yard. You are a Christian. This parable means an awful lot to Christians. For two thousand years, people who bear the same Name that you bear have treasured this parable; it has stirred them, inspired them, moved them to be ready, to wait in expectant anticipation, and it has filled the hearts of innumerable believers with a desire for wisdom. Christ speaks to you in this parable as surely as He has spoken to anyone. “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Jesus’ parables sometimes have extravagant details, unusual angles, unanswered elements. Don’t ask me where the bride is – she’s not important. Don’t ask me whether any oil merchants operated their businesses at midnight – that’s not the point. And the five wise virgins weren’t harsh because they didn’t share their oil. If they gave some of their oil to the foolish ladies then that would likely cause all the torches to be extinguished and the whole procession for the groom would be ruined. Wise versus foolish – that’s the show. Wise versus foolish – the difference means everything. Wise or foolish – which one do you want to be?

Jesus tells this parable because He is going to return. God doesn’t set His agenda according to our preferred calendar. We haven’t been given the knowledge of when He is going to return. In His wisdom, God is keeping that from us. When Jesus returns, it will be lights out. It will be a decisive moment for everyone – some will be ready and some will not be ready. The implications of this contrast cannot be starker. The foolish virgins were not admitted to the marriage feast. Did you hear how Jesus had the bridegroom speak to them? “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” The door is shut. It is a chilling reference to those who are cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hell descends upon the foolish.

Ah, the wise. They brought extra oil. The wise bridesmaids acted as if there was nothing else to live for but this wedding, this procession, the arrival of the bridegroom. They trusted that He

would come, but they did not expect that He would show up at a time that was convenient to them. They waited. Oil in their lamps, extra oil in their flasks, they waited. Prepared, content to wait, content to wait in devotion and quiet expectation, wisdom showed itself and is ushered into the wedding feast. Heaven! The banquet of salvation! Life with God... eternally in His presence, a divine home, blessed peace, complete security, abundant life, truth and beauty and music and the glory of God filling the hearts of men, the souls of women. Heaven!

This life is preparatory – plain and simple. The prince of this world wants you to be foolish. Satan brings diversions galore to cloud God’s Word, to detach you from Christ’s church, to feed you with the slop of vanity and selfishness and indulgence and greed and lust and colossal emptiness. Satan feeds you with worry and a steady diet of fear. Foolishness. If foolishness were a stock it would be through the roof because everyone is buying it; you and me included. There is an army of fools in this world and their emblem is a bone-dry lamp. On occasion, we enlist in this army as we prioritize the material things in life more than Christ and His Word. We enlist in this army as we allow petty distractions to compete with the Divine Service. We enlist in this fool’s brigade as we try so hard *not to think about* what we must have when we meet the Lord Christ. We enlist in this fool’s brigade when we deceive ourselves into thinking that whatever we are lacking we can always get more of *tomorrow*.

You are foolish and you are wise – you are a saint and a sinner. Sometimes you act predominately like one and then at other times you act predominately like the other. The oil... what is the oil? A few pertinent questions will help figure it out. Does repenting of your sins refresh your supply of oil or diminish it? Repentance, does it lead you to yearn for the Lord and His return or does true repentance turn you away from Christ? Courage in the faith, acting on your faith, loving and praying for your enemies, in humility considering others better than yourself and looking for opportunities to serve, being eager to forgive others and asking fervently for those you may have hurt to forgive you – do those things align yourself with Christ, who is wisdom incarnate, or with Satan who is rank foolishness? Willingness to suffer for Christ and His church, willingness to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Him, willingness to abandon the fruitless works of self – does this willingness make you wise or foolish? Will you be more ready for His return when you apply yourself to this, or less? Whatever it takes for us to be ready to honor the Bridegroom when He comes, the parable teaches us to desire those things, to do those things, to be those things.

Do you know who it is that we await? The One who died for us; Jesus is our bridegroom. He is the extraordinary Son of the extraordinary Father. He died to save you... from death, from judgment, from hell, from emptiness and vanity and eternity apart from Him. Love anchored Him to the cross. His love bled to bring you forgiveness. Love anchors Him to you now; His love. Wisdom sees the Lord of glory dying on the cross and weeps for our foolishness. Wisdom looks to the Lord in this present hour and strongly desires to be fed by Him, for apart from what He provides we too would be bone dry – dry in our individual spiritual poverty, dry in our cultural philosophical dessert, dry in our world’s celebration of all things foolish. I suspect that you are exactly like me. I want to be wise. I’ve learned enough to know that Christ Himself is our oil. He Himself makes me ready for His return. We sit at His feet now and welcome Him now and trim our lamps for Him now. God puts our foolishness to flight in this Divine Service. He teaches us to confess our sins aright, we receive the forgiveness won for us on the Holy Cross

through the absolution, through the preached word, through the sacrament of the altar – wisdom breaks in upon us and we are phenomenally blessed.

Appreciation for His gifts is a sign of a full flask – a flask full not of world's vanity or alcohol's numbness, but flasks full of the oil of gladness, the oil of hope, the oil of vibrant faith, the oil of radical trust in Christ and His death and resurrection. He is coming and I hope that it is soon. Christ the King Lutheran Church of Redlands is devoted to making people wise. We rehearse our Lord's return here every Sunday. We greet Him, the One who was made man by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, the One whose flesh was torn as He paid the price for our sins – we greet Him. The true God-Man who died on a Friday afternoon outside of Jerusalem, we greet Him. The same Jesus who rose again on Easter and who ascended into heaven – we greet this King, our Savior. Wisdom flourishes here. We rehearse that great day when He will return and here, we are devoted to Him now. Do you know what that makes us? That makes us wise.