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As We Await the Savior's Coming We Are Watchful

As we bring our annual review of the words and works of Jesus to a close, we remember that Jesus is coming again at the end of time to raise all bodies from their graves and pronounce his saving or his condemning verdict on all. We await his Second Coming and we are watchful, faithful, and hopeful. These are themes of worship in November.

Jesus has not announced the specific date of his return. He has said this: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). Considering how modern communication has crossed the universe and carried the message of Christ to billions, we are wise to be ready and watchful for the Savior's return.

Sermon Matthew 25:1-13

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. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, 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. 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. Later the others also came. Lord, Lord, they said, open the door for us! But he replied, Truly I tell you, I don't know you. Therefore keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour.

Introduction – Lutherans have been hearing Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins ever since Reformation times. When most of us were young we heard this parable every year on the last Sunday of the Church Year. Now we hear it only every third year but still close to the end of the year. The parable is the basis for the sermon this morning. Most of us have heard it before.

Hymnwriters knew the story, too and they wrote great hymns based on the parable. We just sang one of them. Some people consider "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying" to be the king of all Lutheran hymns. Pastor Philip Nicolai took his hymn right out of the parable: "The Bridegroom comes, awake! Your lamps with gladness take! Alleluia! With bridal care yourselves prepare to meet the Bridegroom who is near." A Swedish pastor did the same thing in the first hymn we sang: "The watchers on the mountain proclaim the Bridegroom near; go forth as he approaches with alleluias clear. The marriage feast is waiting; the gates wide open stand. Arise O heirs of glory; the Bridegroom is at hand." Most of us have sung these hymns before.

There's another hymn based on this same parable that most of us haven't sung before. It's not centuries old like the hymns we sang this morning and wasn't written by Lutheran pastors in Europe. Blind Willie Johnson first recorded it in 1929 but slaves in the south were certainly singing it long before that. It's a gospel blues song, a Negro spiritual. It doesn't have the depth we're used to in our Lutheran hymns; you won't find it in many Lutheran hymnals. But in its own simple, unsophisticated way it urges us to do exactly what Jesus urged us to do when he first told this parable. Here's how it goes: ***Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, keep your lamps trimmed and burning for the time is drawing nigh.***

By the time Holy Week Tuesday came around, Jesus was done battling with the Jewish leaders. He had left Jerusalem and was walking with his disciples back to Bethany where he was staying with Mary and Martha and Lazarus. They were taking a little break when the disciples asked Jesus about the last days of Jerusalem and the last days of the world. Jesus looked ahead to both events; some things would be similar and some things would be different. But in both cases, he said, **Keep watch because you do not know on what day the Lord will come.** And that's when he told the parable about the wise and foolish virgins.

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Jesus set up a scene the disciples would have understood; it was part of a typical Jewish wedding. The couple is engaged—legally married back then—and the groom prepares his home for his new bride. They set a time and a place for the actual wedding and they planned to meet there. The bride chose a group of unmarried girls as her attendants. These weddings often took place in the evening and the girls would carry torches to make the procession really something special. The torches were wooden sticks with rags carefully wrapped around one end. The girls would douse the rags with olive oil and light up the sky with them, the brighter the better. The song urges: Keep those lamps trimmed and burning.

The time is coming when all of us are going to meet Jesus. The way things are going in our world right now, Judgment Day may not be too far away; we might still be alive when Jesus returns. It's more likely that we'll meet Jesus when we die. However we meet Jesus when he comes, we need to have our torches lit, we need the light of faith to be burning inside us: **Whoever believes in him shall not perish,** Jesus said. But faith doesn't burn on its own; the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and keeps our faith alive. In this parable the Holy Spirit is the oil. So we keep our faith burning by dousing it with the gospel. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

Second stanza: ***Darker midnight lies before us, darker midnight lies before us, darker midnight lies before us for the time is drawing nigh.*** Jesus set up a problem in the parable. There were ten bridal attendants **Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.** The numbers aren't important here; ten and five aren't the issue. Jesus was talking about two different kinds of people. Both groups of people come to believe in him: baptism, Sunday School, confirmation. Their torches are burning. But some people are foolish because they don't see a need to stoke their faith fire with the oil of the Spirit. Hearing the Word is kind of a sometimes thing for them. They come to church or Bible Class when they can, but pretty often they don't. Their Bible sits on their coffee table, not next to their bed. No prayers at meals or in the morning. Always in a rush; thoughtless and careless about the light of faith and the power of the Spirit, just like those five foolish virgins. Definitely not like the virgins who were wise. The problem: **The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.** Time passes. Good times and bad times; successes and failures; laughter and tears. Life goes on but the torch of faith starts to flicker and dim. Darker midnight lies before us.

Lo, the morning soon is breaking, Lo, the morning soon is breaking, Lo, the morning soon is breaking for time is drawing nigh. That's how the song goes; here's what Jesus said: **At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"** Jesus picked up on a picture in this parable that describes the relationship that exists between himself and believers: Jesus is the Bridegroom and believers are the bride. Isaiah prophesied this marriage already in the Old Testament and Paul used the same picture to exalt marriage in the New Testament. John saw this when he describes heaven: **The wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!** This is what you

and I are looking forward to. The day is coming for all of us when the dark night of Satan and sin and sinful self will come to an end, when the dawn of heaven will break and the bright Morning Star will appear and we will be with the Lord forever. That's what makes the end of time worth watching for. Life in heaven is what life on earth is waiting for. We don't live here just to live out our days. We live here to live in eternity. We hold on to Jesus here so we can be with Jesus forever. Lo, the morning soon is breaking.

Christian journey soon be over, Christian journey soon be over, Christian journey soon be over, for the time is drawing nigh. That's exactly what the foolish virgins forgot or at least overlooked. **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. 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. Later the others also came. Lord, Lord, they said, open the door for us! But he replied, Truly I tell you, I don't know you.** Were there oil stores open in the middle of the night? Were the wise virgins selfish for not sharing their oil? Was the bridegroom mean for not opening the door? None of that matters; that's not the point Jesus is making. The point Jesus makes is that we all have to approach the door of heaven on our own. My grandma was a Christian. My parents brought me to church. I tried my best. I had good intentions. None of that matters at the judgment seat of Christ. What matters is that **we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself up for us.** Faith is the torch that lights the way to Jesus. Faith is the fire that burns with trust in Jesus. Faith is the flame that sparks our love for Jesus. And faith is lighted and fueled by the oil of the Holy Spirit who ignites us with the Word and the sacraments. Christian journey soon be over, brothers and sisters. Jesus says to all of us **Therefore keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour.**

Jesus is coming for sure, but we don't know when. Between now and then Satan will challenge faith, society will distract faith and our sinful nature will compromise faith. Between now and then pleasure and pain will put faith to the test. Wherever you go and whatever you do, take along the oil of the Spirit, the good news from God. And then ***keep your lamps trimmed and burning, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, for the time is drawing nigh.*** Amen.

The sermon was preached by Pastor James Tiefel.