

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 12, 2023 – PENTECOST 24 / PROPER 27 (YR. A)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Ready ... or Not?*”*

Wisdom of Solomon 6:13-20 (To fix one's thoughts on wisdom is perfect understanding)
Psalm 70 (A plea for God's help and deliverance)
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (Our hope is in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ)
St. Matthew 25:1-13 (Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids)

Have you ever been driving on the Turnpike or some superhighway when an electronic sign appears overhead and in large yellow letters warns: “Stay Awake. Stay Alive”? I have. And remembering that, I realized this is Jesus' message for us in today's Gospel.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids is taken from what scholars call the Olivet Discourse in Matthew, chapters 24 and 25. This is Jesus' extended sermon about His Second Coming, in which He teaches about the importance of His followers staying alert and prepared, of being ready and waiting for His coming. Those of us who believe in Christ must always carry with us a sense of the imminent return of Our Lord. He could even come back tonight or tomorrow. We simply do not know when. Are you ready? Matthew 25:1 to 13 addresses the idea of being well-prepared for Christ's return, whether it may be soon, or a long way off.¹

But let's face it. Procrastination is a universal human experience. We all put off doing things we're supposed to do, because we figure we'll get around to them eventually. Students receive assignments at the beginning of the term, then end up pulling “all-nighters” right before finals in order to get their papers finished on time. Children, given a certain amount of time to complete their chores, inevitably wait until the last minute, then scurry around frantically trying to finish the job. And when it comes to Christmas shopping, many men cannot get themselves together to shop any earlier than December 23rd or 24th to finally get something for their wives, kids, or grandchildren. And of course, it's the parishioner who lives closest to the church that's invariably the last one in the door, or even late.

For some reason, when we think we have lots of time, we get lazy and inattentive. We slip into a state of inertia that can be hard to snap out of when time starts running short. Jesus lived and walked this earth over 2,000 years ago and by now that's been a very long time. (Although we must not forget that, as we read in 2 Peter 3:8, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”) While Jesus was on earth, one of the things He talked about—and which those closest to Him believed—was the reality that He would be leaving them but would return again someday to establish His Kingdom. We see this throughout Christ's teachings in the gospels and in other New Testament books.

About His return, Jesus says in Mark 13:32, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” And so, for more than two millennia, believers have been in the difficult position of trying to live as though our Lord might return at any moment. And yet, with each passing year our awareness grows that He still has not come back.

This seemingly endless waiting can cause us to become complacent about Christ coming back at all, when the reality is, our Lord's return could be any day now. Increasingly, prophetic men and women are saying we are either in, or approaching, “the end times,” or “the last days,” and Christ may *indeed* return soon.

But because Jesus knew how difficult it would be for believers to wait for thousands of years, He told a couple of stories to help us think about how we should live our lives in light of His mysteriously long physical, visible, absence. The point He makes throughout these stories is that we do need to be living as if we are prepared and awaiting His return.

In Matthew 24:42, Jesus warns: “be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” He goes on to tell a parable about some wicked servants who squandered away their time partying and carousing, instead of doing the Master’s work while He was away.²

Then Jesus told another story, this time about ten bridesmaids at a wedding. In order to make sense of today’s parable, we need to understand a bit about ancient Jewish wedding customs. Traditionally, the groom would leave his house and travel after sundown to the bride’s home. Then he would escort the bride back to his house. There, the marriage ceremony would take place, and celebrations would continue for days. Part of the entertainment involved a group of bridesmaids dancing around the couple while holding aloft torches. Their glowing lamps symbolized the light of the couple’s love and the bright future they would have together. The women would dance until their torches burned out.³

But this story doesn’t have such a happy ending. In the previous parable, the lazy servant was cut to pieces, and in this parable, the unprepared bridesmaids are shut out of the party. If they didn’t have oil in their lamps, they would not be able to participate in the celebratory dance of the bridegroom—who is Jesus Christ—and His bride, the Church.

So what exactly is going on here? Half the bridesmaids failed to bring lamp oil with them, and half were prepared. As Jesus tells the story, the oil represents our *spiritual state*. Those of you who heat your homes with an oil furnace or propane know what trouble you’re in if you run out of fuel in the middle of winter. Also, our Altar Guild is fully aware of what happens if the candles aren’t filled with lamp oil before the Sunday service. They don’t light! They don’t burn brightly! Jesus is warning us about running low *spiritually*. If our tanks are empty, then just as the bridesmaids could not borrow oil from the attendants who were fully prepared, we can’t borrow anyone else’s *faith*.

If you figure it’s enough just to hang around with good Christian people, or be married to someone who’s a devout follower of Christ, the story of the bridesmaids should be a stark reminder that unless you have your own personal faith in Jesus Christ and devotion Him, you won’t be dancing at His heavenly wedding banquet. In fact, you won’t even be admitted to the party.

If you are living as though you have lots of time to start reading the Bible regularly, pray more often, deepen your spiritual life, and start helping those less fortunate than you, take heed to the earlier parable about what happened to the servant who was not attending to the Master’s work.

Just possibly, the most dangerous lie of Satan is not “there is no God” or “there is no hell,” but rather, “take all the time in the world to have a meaningful relationship with Christ. There’s no hurry.”

So, what does it mean to be ready and waiting? It means having your spiritual lamp filled with the oil God’s Word, the teachings of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit within you, so that you are prepared for the wedding feast which is the promised end of all things. It means keeping your lamp lit by following God’s ways 24/7—and repenting quickly when you fall short—distancing yourself from evil influences; saying no to temptations; and actively loving your neighbors—and your enemies.⁴

A story is told about Britain’s King Charles III, when he was still the Prince of Wales. He was on a visit to the Midlands, and dropped into a workingman’s home. The next day, the man bemoaned to his friends, “I never expected the Prince, nor did my wife. The house was untidy, and I hadn’t washed. We shall never forgive ourselves. If we had known he was coming, we should have been ready for him.”⁵

Whatever you think is your top priority right now, demote it to second place. Consider deepening your relationship with Jesus Christ and His followers the highest priority in your life. In Colossians 3:17, we read: “whatever you do, in word or deed, do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Given your current life, what would the Master say to you, and how would you feel, if He truly were to return right now? Perhaps, like those bridesmaids who waited too long and fell asleep, your faith or spiritual enthusiasm have become dormant. You've thought about renewing your faith, about getting closer to God, or about turning more of your life over to the Holy Spirit, but you've just been too busy, or too tired, or too depressed, or too ... whatever.

But, if today you are feeling convicted by God to re-submit your life to Christ and light your lamp afresh, do not delay. On the other hand, if you are not feeling led in that way, I encourage you to pray about it during the week ahead. And please read Mark, Chapter 13, as well as First Thessalonians 4:13-18 (our Epistle lesson for today!) and Second Thessalonians, Chapter 2. These passages clearly describe what is to come, and how we need to be watching and waiting for our Lord's coming.

Jesus Christ will return. We confess and affirm this every Sunday in the Nicene Creed and in our Eucharistic Liturgy. His coming may or may not be before we leave this earth. But the most important thing is for us to be ready and prepared. What do those Turnpike signs read? "*Stay Awake. Stay Alive.*" If we remain spiritually awake, prepared and eager for Christ's coming, we *will* stay alive—eternally with our Lord, and celebrate at the great wedding banquet promised for all who follow Jesus faithfully. It is my profound prayer that none of us—or anyone we love—will be shut out on that day. Rather, that we will enjoy all the blessings our Heavenly Father desires for us.

Let us pray: Loving Lord, who longs for the heavenly bridegroom to be reunited with His beloved Church, keep us ever mindful of the reality that He will return to claim His bride. Prepare our hearts, souls, minds, and lives to receive Him with a clean conscience and a joyful heart. This we ask in the Name of Jesus Christ Your Son, the Lover of our souls. *Amen.*

⁰ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 9 November 2014, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. Jeremy Myers, "Ready or Not, Here I Come!" February 2014, [RedeemingGod.com](https://redeeminggod.com/sermons/matthew/matt_25_1-13) <https://redeeminggod.com/sermons/matthew/matt_25_1-13> 3 November 2023. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Don Jaques, "Ready and Waiting?" 29 May 2007, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/3-ready-and-waiting-don-jaques-sermon-on-god-the-father-107251) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/3-ready-and-waiting-don-jaques-sermon-on-god-the-father-107251>> 3 November 2023. Used with permission.

³ Adapt. Myers, *op. cit.*

⁴ Adapt. Jaques, *op. cit.*

⁵ Adapt. Myers, *op. cit.*