

Feb. 5, 2023

**WHILE WE WAIT**  
**(Matthew 25:1-13)**

I read about a church who hired a new minister. Everyone was excited and looking forward to his first Sunday. Oddly, on that day, a stranger walked in early and sat down alone, towards the back. He was an older man with a cane.

**PICTURE OLD MAN WITH CANE**

He wore glasses and a well-worn jacket. Nobody knew him. Few talked to him. The service started and he blended in. Meanwhile, the church leaders were concerned because no one had seen their new minister. But his wife assured them he would show up. Well, it came time for introductions and there were a few minutes of panic and awkwardness. This was not a good first impression.

Finally, the stranger, stood up and waked to the front. What is this guy doing? To their shock, the man slipped off his jacket, and glasses and wig and transformed into the new minister. Needless to say, it was a memorable day and he made an unforgettable first impression. Jesus loves to surprise us like that.

Last Sunday we finished up our series from the book of Mark who wrote, Jesus was taken up to heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. It makes it sound as if Jesus has completed his work and retired to Florida. But we know he is alive, and loves to surprise us.

What is the church supposed to do while we wait for the Lord's return? Four times in Matthew 24 Jesus clearly says, no one knows the day or the hour of his return Matt. 24:36. Then he gives us five metaphors for himself, five stories for the church in waiting.

**Jesus in Disguise**

**A thief in the night. (Matthew 24:42-44)**

**A boss who put employees in charge and went on a long vacation. (Matthew 24:45-51)**

**A bridegroom who arrives late for his own wedding. (Matthew 25:1-13)**

**A boss checking his investments. (Matthew 25:14-30)**

**A hungry man. A thirsty neighbor. A needy stranger. A sick acquaintance. A lonely prisoner. (Matthew 31:46)**

These five stories have the same theme. A person in authority leaves. Someone is put in charge. They wait for his unknown return. The authority arrives and holds his people accountable. Some, think the boss forgot and take things into their own hands.

What happens when people stop believing in a Sovereign landlord? Terrible things like the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing. While the cats away the mice will play? But the boss will return like a thief who breaks into someone's home. There's no warning. When the boss returns will he find his employee on an extended coffee break? There was an old rabbi who often said to his students,

**"Repent one day before your death."**

The students asked, "How are we to know when that day will be?" The rabbi said, "All the more reason to repent every day lest you die tomorrow." If you have unfinished business with God then today is the day to get it done. That might mean surrendering your life to him or making things right with someone you've offended or stopping your stubborn procrastination. The consequences are dire.

You and I have stories of dear friends who once walked with the Lord. They were a big part of our life, sharing kingdom work together. You could point to them and say, now, there's an example of Christ in speech, life, love, faith and purity. It hits you very hard when you see their faith unravel. In time they abandon the bride of Christ and your friendship. If it can happen to that guy, it can happen to anyone. I long for my friend to repent and turn around. Most people think that when we die, we all go to the same place but the harsh reality of the story Jesus told at the end of Matt. 24 is this:

**The master will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.**

**He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:50-51)**

That's heavy-duty stuff. But suddenly Jesus moves on to a wedding story. In the first two stories the emphasis is on surprise. The Lord will come sooner than we expected. We thought we had more time to get it together. Now in this third story, the authority figure is the groom, who stays away longer than expected. Weddings rarely start on time. Somebody is always late. Somebody forgets something. There's traffic, weather, accidents. The story is introduced by the familiar words of Jesus on his favorite subject: The kingdom.

**"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. (Matthew 25:1-13)

If you are in the wedding party you are in for the long haul. There's showers and parties, and pictures. You need money for clothes and travel and gifts and hotels. You need time off work. It's helping the bride and groom in every way possible. The bridesmaids knew what they were getting in to, that's why it's surprising they were unprepared. Couples want their day to be special and that usually means cha ching, expensive.

### PICTURE OF WEDDING

According to sources I read, the average cost of a wedding is about \$27,000. First, you need a wedding planner. Then you need a venue, videographer, reception, DJ, caterer, cake, limousine and wedding dress, rings, the hairdresser and on it goes. Hard truth? You don't need any of that stuff to get married.

In Kosovo the groom comes to pick up his bride in a caravan of cars. Sometimes 20-30 cars honking their horns, happy people shouting out the car windows. I remember asking my host, "What happens if the bride is not ready?" He said, "The bride is never ready!" It is a world-wide problem. When Jesus chose the subject of weddings everyone could identify. The great metaphor of wedding describes the relationship between Jesus and the church. The book of Revelation describes like this:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

**I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Revelations 21:2)**

Girls, what would you think if your husband said, Let's not set a date. I'll surprise you someday. Just be ready. What would your mother say? The church is the bride in waiting kind of like that.

### **PICTURE OF WEDDING**

The bridesmaids of course, take care of the bride. They escort the bride and groom to the reception. With no flashlights or electric, they need something to light their way. Think of a torch with strips of cloth soaked in olive oil, or think of a kerosene lamp with a well to store oil. With the long delay, the girls fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him! "

The girls rouse from their sleep and the first thing they do is trim off the burnt part of the wick and reapply the oil so their light can burn brightly. It is at this point that the difference is seen between the wise and foolish. Five don't have enough oil. They ask for the others to share but there's not enough to go around.

**Now this lesson isn't about sharing, nor is it about God providing your needs. Jesus has one point here.**

The five girls realize they have only one choice. Go buy more oil. That would not be easy in the middle of the night. Again, this is not about selfishness. The point is five girls were not prepared. While the five go away to purchase oil, the couple goes to the wedding feast at the groom's house. Now it gets real. The girls who are prepared go to the wedding banquet.

**And the door was shut.**

The five girls arrive late and are refused entry. The blunt words are surprising.

**I tell you the truth. I don't know you.**

Many have tried to tie the Lord's coming to the economy or war, or Israel or political leaders but Jesus himself said very clearly, no one knows the day or the hour. Our obligation is to be alert, be prepared, be ready. Do you remember Friday, December 23, 2023?

### **PICTURE OF BLIZZARD**

For several days, the National Weather Service had been warning of blizzard like conditions that would hit western NY starting on Friday morning. Of course, it was the day before

Christmas Eve and there as much to do. Guests were coming. There were last minute items to pick up at the grocery store. Lots of people had to go to work.

Experienced people prepared with a full tank of gas, shovel, blankets, water and some food, just in case. But as one friend put it, the storms are never as bad as predicted. Except the storm on December 23. You lived it. Ready or not, here it comes. Were you prepared? What would you do differently?

There are lots of juicy details to think about in this third story. The main point is the absolute shock of the five bridesmaids who arrive late and discover they are forever shut out from the wedding celebration.

There are no “do overs.” There’s no second chance. No participation trophy. It’s a brutal and it’s final. Sir! Sir! They said, Open the door for us. But he replied, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.”

Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Be ready! The Christian life is a marathon and maybe you’ve considered dropping out of the race. The delay of the groom was a common habit in weddings in Jesus’ day. What is very unusual is the closed door at the end of the story. We are accustomed to grace and kindness. Yes, you are late, of course you can come in. But Jesus shocks us with truth. In this case, final judgement. Let’s review the roles.

The groom is God, the husband of his people, the church.

The five wise bridesmaids are prepared for judgment day.

The five foolish bridesmaids are unprepared for judgement day.

When the judgment day comes it will be too late to correct things. The final word on this story from Jesus? Keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour. Factors that make us unprepared.

### Doctrinal

Timothy, I give you this instruction, so that you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.

Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. (1 Timothy 1:18-20)

America’s best atheists are the children of the church. (McManus, An Unstoppable Force, Group. 2001, P. 28)

This describes believers who once loved God fiercely but something happened. They were deceived, taken captive by the hollow and deceptive philosophy that depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

### Temporary Values

Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. 2 Tim. 4:9. There's a long list of people named in the Bible whose love for the world made them unprepared for judgment day. Esau, Achan, Ahab, Herod and Pilate. The stuff of earth competes for the allegiance I owe only to the Giver of all things. Rich Mullins. What are you chasing? Will it matter in eternity?

### Moral Issues

Solomon, his wives first turned his head and then turned his heart.

### Broken Fellowship

We have seen how a broken relationship can quickly turn into a bitter spirit. We have seen how someone took offense and used it as a reason to walk away from God and his church. A roaring campfire can be quickly extinguished by spreading out the wood and coals. The bright flames die down quickly. Together they burn bright. Separated they go out, and that's the danger of breaking fellowship. We need each other. Are you prepared today for the return of the groom? Might he say to you, "I don't know you?" I urge you to get it together today. Keep watch because you don't know the day or the hour.