**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Matthew 25: 1-13
November 8, 2020**

 A Bible study group was discussing the topic of Judgment Day. The leader, desiring to have his class give some real thought to the topic asked this question: “*What would you do if you knew you only had 4 weeks of life remaining before the Great Day of Judgment?”*

 One man said, “I would go out into my community and witness to those who do not yet know the gospel.” *“Very good*,” said the group leader, and all the members agreed that would be a very good thing to do. One lady spoke up enthusiastically and said, “I would dedicate al of my remaining time to serving God, my family, my church and my fellow man with greater conviction.” “That’s wonderful,” said the leader and again, everyone in the class agreed that would be a wonderful thing to do.

 Finally, one gentleman in the back spoke up quite loudly saying, “*I would go to my mother-in-law’s house for the 4 weeks.”* Puzzled by his answer, the group leader asked, *“Why would you do that?” “Because,”* said the man, *“I am not all that anxious for Judgment Day and being at my mother-in-law’s house would make those the longest 4 weeks of my life.”*

Now, everyone likes a good joke and, I suppose, we even like a good joke about Judgment Day. And, I think the reason we can laugh at Judgement Day is because most of us don’t really spend a lot of time thinking about it as reality. Life just seems to keep on keeping on and so we don’t waste time thinking that someday, each of us is going to face the Day of Judgment.

 However, for Jesus, he is very aware of the reality of Judgment Day. It is going to occur, and really, when you think about it, it is not a joking matter. Someday, at a time no one knows, our Lord will return and judge both the living and the dead. He will come to judge both you and me. The unnerving question for all is, *“What will be the state of our faith at that time?”*

 We are approaching the end of the church year. The new year for the church starts with Advent on November 29th. And we look forward with great joy to celebrating again the birth of our Lord on Christmas Day. Now, while the church year begins on a joyous note, it ends with a most somber tone. Our attention is turned to the serious matter of judgment. And the parable for us today is about as serious as it gets.

 Now, as always, the context of this is very important. This parable appears in the middle of what we call, “Matthew’s Little Apocalypse.” Matthew spends chapters 24 and 25 talking about the end times and the coming judgment. And so here we see him liken Judgment Day to a bridal party. The parable is based on the Jewish marriage customs of Jesus’ day. There was a religious ceremony for the betrothal which legally bound the couple together as man and wife. However, it wasn’t until weeks later that the groom would go to his bride’s house in order to bring her to his home. The bride’s attendants, the virgins in the parable, would go out to meet the groom to escort him to the bride. The lamps not only illuminated the way but also provided a festive atmosphere for the event.

 But Jesus makes a distinction between the attendants. Some were wise and some were foolish and this fact is evident right away. The foolish attendants forgot to bring extra oil for their lamps. They were unprepared should the groom be delayed. Now, outwardly, as they all carried their lamps, they looked the same as the wise virgins. Judging by their appearance, no one could tell who was wise and who was foolish.

 So what is the point? Well, this parable in a lot of ways carries the same meaning as The Parable of the Sower. If you recall that parable, the seed is scattered and some of the seed lands on rocky soil where it takes root and grows quickly, but there is no depth and so the plant withers and dies. Here, in this case, what we have is the foolish virgins in not those who were outright hypocrites. They believed and trusted that our Lord would return. The problem, however, comes when he is delayed.

 The church has always thrown a lot of labels at these folks. We call them “lukewarm” or “nominal Christians,” but the key point is that they are those who aren’t prepared to be Christians for the long haul, if you will. The Christian walk of faith, my friends, is not a sprint to the finish line. It is an endurance race.

 Many Christians don’t realize this. Christian author, Trillia Newbell, describes it this way, *“When we first become Christian, the future seems bright, everything is exciting, and there may even be freedom from past sins. But then the reality of the Christian walk sets in. We battle with sin, trials come, dry seasons leave us parched for the Lord and we realize what was once bright and wonderful has become confusing and difficult. We are in a torrential downpour and unable to see through to the other side. Our vision of God gets distorted and we can become discouraged.”*

Newbell is right, and because our Lord is delayed, there is a temptation in our Old Adams to slowly drop out of the race. It seems we are waiting for an event, the coming of the groom, that doesn’t seem to be coming at all.

 For a while, when my son was younger, we were part of the Civil Air Patrol. If you are not familiar with the organization, it is the auxiliary of the United States Air Force. However, it actually served a great function for our country. It focused on search and rescue missions. Particularly for downed aircraft. For six years, every Tuesday evening and often Saturdays also, we practiced and learned search and rescue techniques. It was exciting at first. But, in those six years, do you know how many search and rescue missions we were activated for? Zero! Admittedly, I became bored with the whole thing. The “event” we were training for never came. Likewise, what’s the point of putting forth the effort of being a Christian if Jesus doesn’t seem to be coming?

 And that is when the slow drift begins. Church attendance becomes sporadic. Our bibles remain closed and collect more dust as eventually they move from the coffee table to the shelf where they are never touched. Reception of God’s gifts, the Lord’s Supper, absolution, his Word, those very things that he gives to strengthen us so we may endure, we neglect. Our Lord who in his graciousness called us by his gospel and gave us faith to endure to the end and gave us the very things we need to be prepared for his return, will return and find many unprepared. Blame it on what you want, the weakness of our flesh, the temptations of the world, the general sinfulness of our existence, or whatever, the bottom line is that the flame of faith that burned so brightly becomes extinguished.

 Simply put, the foolish virgins neglected their faith to the point of losing it. They no longer believed the groom was coming. This is what condemns them when the bridegroom finally arrives. They find themselves locked out of the celebration.

 It is a pretty heavy message our Lord gives us today and it is no joking matter. The parable is a sober warning to us all to be prepared. The day is coming when our Lord will return. I have no idea when it will happen, but it will happen. What will the state of our faith be? Will we be prepared?

 I guess that last question kind of begs the questions, “How are we prepared for his return?” Well, I mentioned it a bit earlier. We use the things he has given to us so that he might prepare us.

 My dear friends in Christ, when our Lord in his mercy calls us by the gospel, he gives us all we need to prepared and that is faith. Faith trusts in Christ and Christ alone for its salvation. Faith continually turns to Jesus who is both the author and the perfecter of our faith. And that faith he has granted us is perfect. He gives us his Word wherein he feeds and nourishes that faith; wherein he teaches us about him and the salvation he has accomplished for us on the cross; wherein he encourages us to endure to the end.

 He gives us his Supper, where he actually gives us himself. It is the meal of faith. A meal to nourish and strengthen us so that when he does come, our faith will be burning brightly.

 We are prepared perfectly because our perfect Lord prepares us. So, when he returns, we will not find ourselves locked out of the celebration, but instead, by his grace, we will join in the marriage feast. The feast that has no end. To Jesus be the glory. Amen.