

The Last Sunday of the Church Year (Trinity 27)  
St. Matthew 25:1-13: "Keeping the Lamp Burning in the Darkness"  
November 25/26, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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Lord God, heavenly Father, make us watchful and heedful in awaiting the coming of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that when He shall stand at the door and knock, He may find us not sleeping in carelessness and sin, but awake and rejoicing in His appearance; through the same, Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*ELH*, p. 165)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

[Jesus said:] "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' / "Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' / "But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. / "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' / "But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' / "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."<sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who came into our world of darkness, so we may join Him in His kingdom of light, dear fellow redeemed:

One of the books in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series details the adventures of Prince Caspian and his friends as they sailed in a ship called the "Dawn Treader." One of the islands they discovered was a place "where dreams come true." That may sound like a pleasant place to be, except that it wasn't just good dreams that became reality; it was *all* dreams. The harder a person tried to think good thoughts, the more bad thoughts would come to mind—and come true. To emphasize the terror of this place, Lewis described it as an island totally enveloped in darkness. After rescuing a man who had been trapped on the island for years, the ship's captain and crew rowed back toward the light as quickly as they could.

It is in the darkness that we typically feel the most fear. When it is dark, we do not fear dangers that are *actually* around us, as much as the dangers that *could be* around us. Our own minds are the greatest threat to our feeling of safety. Some weeks ago, I watched the Ken Burns television

series on the Vietnam War. One of the marines who was interviewed said that he won't sleep without a nightlight. He remembers too vividly what it was like to go out on patrol in the darkness and to hear the voices and movements of an enemy he could not see. That terrifying experience still wakes him up at night and probably always will.

## I

A deep darkness where terrible things happen is how the Bible describes this fallen world. This world is *"the domain of darkness"* (Col. 1:13), where Satan and his followers operate. The danger is all around us, but it cannot be seen. By nature, everyone is blind to the threat. They can't see *"the devil prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour"* (1Pe. 5:8). They also don't recognize—or else won't admit—the darkness in their own hearts. They are quick to point out the bad behavior and wicked actions of others, while self-righteously thinking that they could never be capable of doing those things.

But the darkness of sin is not just around us, it is in us. Jesus says that from the heart comes all sorts of sinful thoughts and actions—sexual immorality, theft, lies, slander (Mt. 15:19). Our hearts on their own cannot chart a course leading to God and heaven. On their own, our hearts have us heading toward deeper darkness, where dreams might come true, but not like we were expecting.

It was into this world of spiritual darkness that God the Father sent His holy Son. But if mankind was blind to the good things of God, how would they ever recognize His coming? The Lord first sent John the Baptizer to prepare the way for the Savior. He boldly preached in the wilderness to expose *"the unfruitful works of darkness"* (Eph. 5:11), and to *"bear witness about the light"* (Jn. 1:8). He told the people that *"The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world,"* and then he pointed out Jesus as that light (vv. 9, 29). Jesus Himself said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (8:12).

But many did not follow Him. *"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him"* (1:10-11). His own people did not receive Him, because they did not want to own up to their aimless wandering in the darkness. They wanted to think they were on the right path, the path of righteousness. Proverbs 4 says that *"the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble"* (vv. 18-19). What the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees stumbled over was Jesus. He told them that their righteousness was merely external, superficial. Their hearts were empty vessels devoid of the faith and love that God requires.

Only God knows from one person to the next whether their hearts contain the flame of faith. Take today's parable about the women waiting for the bridegroom. All ten of them were virgins and all ten of them had oil-burning lamps. If you saw them when they first arrived for the wedding feast, you would have noticed no differences among them. But when the bridegroom did not come right away, *"they all became drowsy and slept."* They had not anticipated the delay. They thought he was coming sooner. They might have begun to wonder if he would come at all.

Even so, five of the virgins had prepared for this possibility. They had extra oil with them. If the other five were aware of this, they might have made fun of them or criticized them for being

such worriers. But they weren't laughing when the cry sounded at midnight that the bridegroom had come. "Give us some of your oil," they begged, "for our lamps are going out." But the five wise virgins did not have enough oil to share. While the unprepared women went to buy more oil, the door to the wedding feast was closed, and they were denied entrance. Their opportunity had come and gone; they must remain in the darkness.

This parable is Jesus' warning to all that He is coming again soon to admit those who are prepared to His wedding feast. He will know who is ready by the presence or absence of faith in the heart. On the outside, many may appear to have a living faith—their lamps may seem to have an active flame. But nobody can fool the Lord. No one can impress Him either. No amount of generous deeds, kind words, or impressive knowledge will count as a substitute for faith. It was not the most intelligent, the most beautiful, the most successful women who were admitted to the wedding feast. It was the ones who were prepared; it was the faithful.

## II

Faith is not the kind of thing that once you have it, you keep it forever. For many, faith is like a match that burns for a time but then goes out. Faith must be kept alive by some sort of fuel. But that fuel does not come from inside us any more than faith itself does. The One who strikes the flame of faith inside our darkened hearts is God the Holy Spirit, who uses the kindling power of God's Word. The dynamic Word of God is the oil that keeps faith burning bright even in the midst of great darkness. The five wise virgins had oil reserves along—they had the Word. The five foolish virgins took their faith for granted and found that their flame had gone out by the time the bridegroom arrived.

But notice that all ten women "became drowsy and slept" before his arrival. All ten of them failed to properly keep watch like they should have. As long as we live in this dark world, we must be on our guard against Satan and our sinful nature, and ready ourselves daily with the Word of God. We are always in danger of going through the motions as Christians, of hearing the Word regularly but not taking our sins and repentance seriously.

The Apostle Paul warns us about this, "So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom. 13:12-14). He sounds the same alarm in today's Epistle lesson, "So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation" (1Thes. 5:6-8).

Paul says that we who are in the light should not act like those in the darkness, because we are not in the kingdom of darkness anymore. Satan and his cohorts no longer have dominion over us. Their dark plans, along with the yawning pit of death and hell, were all exposed and dispelled by the light of Jesus. He gave Himself over into darkness, so that you would be rescued from it and brought into the light.

The light of His grace and salvation is strong enough to pierce even into the darkest of hearts. This healing light has also entered your heart. Whatever darkness was there by nature and

active sin, is removed and replaced by light, just as the flip of a light switch does away with the darkness that was previously there. Now there is nothing more in the spiritual darkness of the world that you have to fear. By the light of Jesus, nothing can ambush you or harm you.

Even now in this light, you see through the darkness to the banquet hall ahead, glowing with marvelous light. That is where the marriage feast is ready and waiting. As you journey forward, you have the Word of God, *“a lamp shining in a dark place”* (2Pe. 1:19), *“a lamp to [your] feet and a light to [your] path”* (Ps. 119:105). His Word is what keeps your lamp of faith burning as the darkness of this age passes and the bright dawn of eternity comes.

It will not be long before you and I hear the cry, *“Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.”* Then we will experience something much better than even our best dreams. Jesus will graciously call everyone who trusts in Him to follow Him into His glorious kingdom of light. In the unfiltered presence of the mighty God, we will need no light of lamp or sun, for He will be our light, and we will reign with Him forever and ever (Rev. 22:5).

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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