

Rev. Danny Mackey
Last Sunday of the Church Year
November 22, 2020
Matthew 25:1-13
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

What do you watch? I’m not asking about what’s on your Netflix or Hulu watchlist. Although, those can reveal a lot about a person. Rather, I’m asking about the things that are happening in the world and have your attention. What do you watch?

Whenever I watch the news and track all the things that are going on in our country, I become very concerned. Depressed even. The various news outlets seem to report the exact same thing, without variation or nuance. Whatever the network, the same message—sometimes using the very exact same script—is being put out. It’s like George Orwell’s *1984* has become a horrific reality. I watch and listen to alternative media as well. There’s more variety and less conformity to a particular agenda or narrative. But still violence and hate are reported more often than not. Despair rules the day; joy is verboten.

The pandemic and the elections. People are being beat up in the streets by those who use violence to promote their political agendas. Riots and destruction happen both in the U.S. and abroad. Christians are dying by the thousands across the globe—merely because they are Christian. Wars and rumors of wars. Bloodshed and famine and hardship. People saying “Peace, peace” when there is no peace. Doctors who took oaths to do no harm assisting patients in killing themselves. Millions and millions of babies killed in the wombs of their mothers. Human decency is a thing of the past—if it ever existed in the first place. There’s nothing decent about supporting the deaths of the unborn. Likewise, there’s nothing decent about rude and churlish behavior. Violence of thought and deed and policy all around in what I see when I watch the world. There is no good in man. None are good. No, not one.

So I turn my face to the heavens. I watch the skies, waiting for Christ to Return. That’s what we are given to watch. To pay attention to. Brothers and sisters, watch for Christ.

We’ve been taught to pray, “Thy kingdom come... on earth as it is heaven.” Also, “deliver us from evil.” And, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rv 22:20). With all these petitions, we are asking for

Jesus to Return and to bring about the End of the world. Or, as we confess in the creed, “And He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.”

Christians want for Jesus to Return and for the world to End. We confess it. We pray for it. We want the suffering and injustice and hatred and violence to all...just...stop. As Jesus promises, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rv 21:4). That’s what we want! “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

But, at the same time, as your pastor, I don’t want Jesus to Return just yet. Not for my benefit, not even for the benefit of the world, but for the benefit of many people in this congregation. Not everyone in this congregation is watching for the right thing. Many are distracted by the things of this world and have been foolish. In other words, many members of this congregation are neglecting their salvation. That’s what Jesus’ parable about the wise and foolish virgins is about.

The virgins, both the wise and foolish, symbolize the Church. Each Christian congregation is the visible Church on earth. And in this visible Church are both believers and unbelievers, both wise and foolish. Those who aren’t even in a Christian congregation can’t be part of the Church. They are of the world. A person who doesn’t go to and belong to a Christian congregation can’t be a Christian. I don’t care what they say. And neither does Jesus. Christians go to church.

This parable, then, is about those who are *in* the Church. That’s why they’re virgins. That’s us. We who, at least, appear Christian.

So, do you watch the heavens and for Christ’s Return? Or do you watch only for other things? Are you wise, or are you a fool?

The Athanasian Creed says, “At His coming all people will rise again with their bodies and give an account concerning their own deeds. And those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire.” Which are you? Do you do good? Or do you do the evil?

Most people think they’re pretty good. (Occasionally, you find a Lutheran who says that nobody’s good.) And when people want to prove their goodness, they point out how they haven’t killed anybody or haven’t stolen anything or haven’t had an affair. Things no one

should do. Others go a step further and say how they serve food at the soup kitchen or participate in charitable organizations. All good things. Things Christians ought to do.

But most people, including Christians, focus on the Commandments Four through Ten—from “Honor your father and your mother” to “You shall not covet.” They forget or ignore the first three Commandments about God’s person, His name, and His worship. If you don’t keep all the commandments—especially the first three—then you aren’t good enough. In fact, as St. James says, “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (Jas 2:10).

If Jesus Returned today, how would you be judged? How would Jesus judge the many members of this congregation? Would His angels usher you into eternal life, or would they cast you into eternal fire?

Jesus is patient. It is for the benefit of many churchgoers that He is slow to come again to judge the living and the dead. Jesus is patient, giving people the chance to be taken out of foolishness. As St. Peter writes, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2Pt 3:9). Indeed, Jesus is patient, giving people opportunity to be made wise. As St. Paul says, made “wise unto salvation.”

How does one become wise? That’s what we need to know. If the wise are allowed into the wedding feast of salvation and the foolish are left outside to pound on the door, well then...as Christians, we want to be the wise.

St. Paul tells young pastor Timothy that he was made wise unto salvation by the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is the very Word of God, which creates and sustains faith in Christ. It is through faith—faith alone—that one is saved. Faith makes us wise. As the Athanasian Creed also says, “This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.” Or, as the risen Christ says, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mk 16:16a).

When we are watching the world and ignoring Christ and His Word, we are being foolish—not being wise and faithful. That’s why it’s not enough for us to be kind and loving toward our fellow human creatures, but we also need God’s person, His name, and His worship. The first three Commandments are about us being made wise. They are about our being saved by our Creator.

When we watch the heavens, waiting for Christ's Return, we are fearing, loving, and trusting in Him before all things. He will not disappoint. None but He can accomplish all that He's promised. He has given Himself into death to prove how He loves us. We have abundant reason to trust in Him.

When we rely on His name, calling upon it in our trouble in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, we are comforted. Our God and Lord comforts us with His Word and promises. He reminds us that He has put His name upon us. We are named Christians. "Little Christs" to the world, as Luther puts it.

When we come to Church, we are made wise by that Word of salvation and strengthened in the faith by the Sacraments. The Sacraments are that very Word made concrete, tangible, and certain. Using the language of the parable: the Sacraments are the oil of our lamps, which will allow us to see our Bridegroom when He arrives.

And when our Bridegroom does come—"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"—these things will have kept us ready and waiting to receive Him. His accompanying angels will usher us into eternal life. Not because of what we've done, but because of the Bridegroom and what He's done for us.

He has worked salvation. Salvation is freedom from the threat of harm. All the violence and hatred and injustice of this world will be taken far from us. "As far as east is from the west" (Ps 103:12). Just as He has done with our sins. On the cross. He will come in power and great might. His kingdom will come. And in this kingdom, Christ will reign His cross over us. And those who are foolish—that is, those who do not believe—will be excluded, never to torment or attack or threaten those who are wise—that is, those who believe. Christ will come in power and great might and establish an everlasting kingdom... and His "kingdom will have no end."

Therefore, watch. Watch the heavens and pay attention for Christ's Return.

In His name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.