

24th Sunday after Pentecost – November 12, 2023

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Every year we take a two-week break from the readings for the Sundays after Pentecost to celebrate the minor church festivals of the Reformation and All Saints Sunday. And when we get back from our break, the tone of our readings has noticeably shifted. Thematically, we are in the end times now. The focus is on God at last showing up to reclaim the world for Godself. And the feeling is kind of ominous. Get used to it, because this is going to be our theme for the next three weeks as well, including the first week of Advent. This has led some people to propose extending the season of Advent to seven weeks instead of four. I can see the logic in that, and wouldn't be opposed to trying it out some year. But whether we call it Advent or not, the theme remains. And this year it seems to fit our current events as well, which I already noticed several weeks back. Two brutal hot wars are in progress right now. Our polarized, dysfunctional political climate continues apace, with another threat of a government shutdown looming. Climate change hasn't gone away either, though it's perhaps easier to ignore as the seasonal temperature drops. And then on a more personal level, some of us may be facing serious illness, or employment or relationship issues, and the end times can seem particularly relevant and close.

I want to have a quick look at two of our three readings this morning, with the goal of connecting the coming of God's future with each of our own futures. And I want to start with our second reading from 1 Thessalonians. I've spoken to you before about the popular belief among some Christians in the "rapture," when all the good Christians will suddenly be snatched up into heaven in order to spare them from those horrible and bloody disasters in the book of Revelation. Today's second reading is one of the key proof texts for belief in the rapture. I've also mentioned that the rapture isn't really there in the Bible. It's an idea that *seems* to have some biblical support, if you pick unconnected details from very different parts of the Bible. But in reality, it's a misinterpretation of the Bible that was thought up in nineteenth-century England, and it turns out that this passage from 1 Thessalonians has nothing to do with that sort of "rapture."

Paul writes that at Jesus' coming at the end of the world, those of his followers who are still alive will join those of his followers who are dead, to meet Jesus in the sky. Now, that kind of *sounds* like the rapture, doesn't it? But then what? The text doesn't say. And so we might assume they fly on up to heaven to be with Jesus. How does the song go? "Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away. To my home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away"? But is that what is going on here? What we moderns miss here is that this is a description of a royal visit in ancient times, when a king comes to stay in one of his cities. The living and the dead who go up in the air to meet Jesus in this telling are really a greeting party who go out to escort him to their home. Like you do when friends or relatives come for a stay. You meet them in the driveway and help them carry in their luggage. This fits with that final image in the book of Revelation that we often forget about, of the Holy City coming down from heaven and God coming to live with us here at the end of time. In this very last vision at the very end of the Bible, we don't end up in heaven. God ends up here, and the Kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom that comes from heaven and is ruled by heaven, is finally lived out here on Earth. Isn't that what we're praying for in the Lord's Prayer? "Your kingdom come," here, "on earth as it is in heaven"? That is *very* different from the supposed rapture, and it has very different implications for how we live faithfully in the here and now. Think about it. If Jesus is coming in the end to snatch you up to heaven, then you don't have to worry about the earth or what happens to us. You just leave it behind. And until you leave you can cut down the forests, pollute the land, air, and water, and hunt its creatures to extinction. Who cares?

It's all going to be destroyed anyway! But if Jesus is coming to live here, then preparing for Jesus' coming means taking care of the earth that is going to be our common home. It means taking our life in this world seriously, and so witnessing to our hope in God's promised future for the world God created to be good.

Taking things seriously is also what our Gospel reading is getting at this morning, the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids that inspired the Advent hymn, "Wake, awake..." Another point in favor of starting the Advent season right about now? This text can come across as very harsh if we read it in isolation from the rest of Matthew's Gospel. The wise ones, who have thought ahead and prepared, get to go into the wedding party, while the foolish ones, who for whatever reason did not prepare, get locked out. So keep awake, says Jesus. And if you don't keep awake, too bad for you? Is that what Jesus is saying here? Let's have a closer look, and then consider this parable in context. Something I came to realize only this time around in studying this text is that some of my assumptions about it have been wrong. Our translation says that the bridesmaids are carrying lamps, and we've put a nice image of an ancient oil lamp in your bulletin there. So what I had always thought is that all of them had lamps with oil in them, and the lamps were all burning when they went out to meet the bridegroom, but when the groom was delayed, some had brought along extra oil, while the others didn't. So, if the bridegroom had not been delayed, there would not have been a problem. But these aren't really oil lamps. There's a different word for that. They are more like torches, sticks that you wrap the top of in oil-soaked cloth and then light. They were a traditional part of the wedding dance at ancient weddings in this part of the world. So trimming the lamps (or preparing the torches) was about dipping the cloth in the oil and wrapping it around the stick. You don't *add* oil to torches like that. It's a one and done sort of thing. So the fact that some of the bridesmaids did not have oil is not a result of the groom being delayed, but just being *completely* unprepared. Their torches were going out because an essential part was missing. Cloth without oil does not burn well or long. I know, it messes up our nice graphic, and our next hymn. But we can make a mental note and just go with it. But notice something else. The moral of the story according to Jesus is to "keep awake" because you don't know when the Lord is coming. Except that none of the bridesmaids kept awake. They all fell asleep, the wise with the foolish. It reminds you, doesn't it, of an episode that is coming a little later in this Gospel, when the disciples will be asked to stay awake with Jesus as he prays in the garden. And they will fail. And later they will all abandon Jesus as he is arrested and crucified outside of the city gates, in the outer darkness. This is the necessary context I mentioned earlier that saves this text from making our salvation depend on our wise or foolish conduct. Because if it really is up to us to keep awake and be prepared, we are doomed. Because we are going to fail, just as Jesus' original disciples did.

The good news for the foolish bridesmaids, for the terrified, faithless disciples, and for you and me in our failures to follow Jesus and trust his promises, is that he is nevertheless with us, all of us, in our outer darkness. He will knock again on the door of the wedding party, and the one who answers will say, "Oh, I know *you*. You are my son, the beloved. But who are these losers?" "They're with me," he will answer. And the door will be opened, and the party will resume. That is the real end of the story.

With that in mind, trusting that it is Jesus who saves us and not ourselves, there is nevertheless work to be done in the here and now, the joyous work of preparing for the coming kingdom that we are constantly praying for. We do that, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, by witnessing to the hope that is now within us, even in the midst of wars, polarization, and apathy, by making disciples of all nations. And as we go about that joyful, hopeful task, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.