**24th Sunday after Pentecost (L32A), November 8, 2026** Pastor Chris Repp
Matthew 25:1-13 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
We are back from our two-week detour of Reformation and All Saints Sundays into those end-times texts in Matthew that we started back in late September. The kingdom of heaven, says Jesus, will be like a vineyard, or a wedding, or a group of bridesmaids in this week's reading, or a master who entrusts his treasure to his servants, which we'll get next week, or like sheep and goats, in our last Gospel reading of this church year. In all of these stories there are winners and losers. Some make it into the kingdom of heaven, and some are shut out, cast into the outer darkness to weep and gnash their teeth.

It has occurred to me only recently that in shaping the lectionary this way, with these end-times texts as, effectively, the final word for the church year, we are in danger of missing something crucially important about how these texts are actually answered in the Gospels themselves. What we set up instead is a kind of nagging unease as the church year winds down, with warnings about our behavior that are not unlike how we have traditionally held Santa Claus up to our children as a warning about their behavior as Christmas approaches. "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why… Santa Claus is coming to town!" God knows if you are being naughty or nice, we signal with these ominous readings, and we notice that there will be Hell to pay if we are naughty.

The problem with ending the church year this way, though, is that none of the Gospels end this way. In the first three Gospels, which our three-year lectionary cycles through, these end-times readings, with their masters and kings enthroned in glory and splendor, pronouncing judgment on their subjects, come *before* Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Only in the year of Luke do we get as our final Gospel reading of the year Jesus on the cross, as a reminder when we celebrate Christ the King Sunday and talk about Jesus as King and Lord, that Jesus' way of ruling is not like that of the rulers of this world that come to mind when we normally use those titles. God's coming reign in the kingdom that Jesus will bring to its fulness at his return is qualitatively different from our way of exercising power and authority in the present age.

You could say, then, that what happens in Matthew with this ordering of events, and in Mark and Luke as well, is that Jesus effectively rewrites each of these apocalyptic stories, and he does so in this way: Whenever there is someone who is cast into the outer darkness, thrown out of the wedding feast or not let in, there is Jesus alongside them. Jesus is crucified outside the gates of Jerusalem, where darkness covers the land as he suffers and dies. But the outer darkness is not the last word for Jesus. That was Friday, as the bishop reminded us last week, and Sunday was coming. The resurrection dawn breaks into the outer darkness and casts its light on all who have ended up there in all those stories, by their negligence, by their arrogance, by their selfish preoccupations, by their foolishness or their fear. So that out of what seemed like hopeless finality comes instead a surprising gift: new, abundant, and everlasting life.

Let's walk through today's Gospel reading to see how this story of the bridesmaids might play out in light of Jesus' crucifixion. And for clarity's sake, let's bring along the apostle Peter, who features so prominently in Matthew. Peter's story is the one we know the ending to, so we can use him as a test case for rewritten stories.

This story of the bridesmaids is one that is strongly associated with this time of the church year for me. In fact, in my mind it's connected with Advent. And maybe that's because of that famous hymn by Philip Nickolai that we sang every year in Advent when I was a kid, and

the even more famous cantata that Bach based on it: *Wachet Auf,* Wake Awake. The organ prelude that comes from the fourth movement got played a lot in November and December even when the story wasn't in the lineup. (You know the one, I think.) The imagery of that hymn is so evocative, and connected so well with my childhood experience of anticipation and preparation as Christmas approached. And now I'm regretting just a little that we're not singing it today. We did talk about it. But it's just a little hard to sing. And the hymn we picked actually does the same job: Both retell the story and connect it explicitly with the return of Christ. But here's the reason I think I have such warm feelings about this text. Neither hymn says anything about what happens to the foolish bridesmaids who didn't prepare and missed the wedding procession. They don't mention them being locked out of the wedding feast. But that is how Jesus ends the story. The bridegroom does not know the foolish bridesmaids when they return with their oil, and he doesn't open the door to let them in. So, let that be a lesson to you to keep awake!

Except it's not a lesson in keeping awake, is it? All of the bridesmaids – the wise ones and the foolish ones – all of them fell asleep! Now it's time to remember that we brought Peter along on this ride, and I want to remind us that Jesus said some difficult things to and about Peter too. You'll remember how Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, and how Jesus said he would build the church on Peter's surprising God-given faith, but then how immediately after that Peter tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to be crucified, and Jesus called him Satan. But even before that, back in Matthew chapter 10, Jesus talked about the difficulty the disciples would face in their mission of proclaiming the gospel, and he ended with this warning: Whoever acknowledges me before people, I will acknowledge before my Father. But whoever denies me before people, I will deny before my Father in heaven. And then what happens after Jesus is arrested and is handed over to be crucified? Peter denies Jesus before people, just as Jesus said he would. So, was that the end for Peter? Is he destined for the outer darkness with the foolish bridesmaids? Will he, with them, be weeping and gnashing his teeth?

The answer, I think, is yes. But it is also no. Yes, Peter does find himself in the outer darkness, weeping bitterly at the cock's crow after denying Jesus before people. And even before that, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he fails to keep awake as Jesus instructed. But also no. Because Peter is there on the mountain with the other disciples in the very last verses of Matthew's gospel, being welcomed and forgiven by Jesus, and sent out into the world to embody the gospel before the nations. So, if the outer darkness is not the end of Peter's story, can the end of the foolish bridesmaids' story really be eternal exclusion? Can it really be that they knocked and the door was *never* opened to them, that they were permanently locked out, in spite of Jesus' earlier promise to the contrary? Can the final word for them really be, "no forgiveness for you"? Or do Jesus' death and resurrection rewrite their story like they rewrite Peter's?

And what about our stories, filled with failures like theirs and like Peter's, we who sin, and fall short of the glory of God in all sorts of ways, day in and day out? Can the outer darkness really be our final destination? Or, to stick with the metaphor, can the final draft of our story really have us permanently and irrevocably separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Heck no! Stop the presses! That's what Jesus says as he bursts from his tomb. I've got a new ending for you. A better ending. You belong to me, and I'm not giving up on you. And even that is not the end. There's one more chapter. I want you to come with me, says Jesus, into all of the outer darknesses of this world to bring the light of my love to those who are weeping there, to bring the light of hope to those who have given up hope, and the light of life to those who are dead and dying. Grab your torches. I've got the oil.