

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

How do you prepare for a trip? Certainly Marge and I are a study in contrasts. Marge makes a list in advance, gathers things together, puts them on the bed, and checks them off as she puts them in the bag. She is certainly organized; you might say wise. She is after all these days packing for two. My style is more haphazard; you might say foolish. I wait until the last minute and, with a little jingle in my head, put things in my bag. Still, regardless, whether wise or foolish, we are rarely prepared at our desired time to leave. Of course, with our trips, it also rarely makes a difference.

How different it is for the coming of the Bridegroom in our Gospel lesson! In the Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about being prepared, and this preparedness makes the difference between entrance into the eternal wedding feast and being locked out as strangers.

Ten virgins were waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom. All ten had lamps in hand. Five were wise; they brought along oil for their lamp; they were prepared. Five were foolish; not prepared; no flask of extra oil.

When the call went up that the Bridegroom was coming, the wise were ready. They trimmed their lamps and followed the Bridegroom to the wedding feast. The lamps of the five foolish, however, were running out of oil; their lamps were going out.

At first glance, we might think this doesn't seem to be a big deal. It's a bit of oil. Why not have the others share their oil? Why can't they just go to the oil vendors, buy some oil, and come to the feast? But, being prepared is the point of Jesus' parable — each one of us individually — and the five foolish virgins were unprepared.

Therefore, these five foolish virgins had lost their chance, and the consequences were enormous. When they returned, they were locked out. Even worse, when they entreated the doorkeeper to let them in, he said *“Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.”* And if Jesus' previous parable using a wedding feast as a backdrop is any indication, being on the outside, left in the *“outer darkness,”* is not where one wants to be, for *“In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Matt. 22:13). They had no one to blame but themselves; it was their own most grievous fault.

The application is clear, I think. Jesus is talking to us in the church, to those who have been invited to the wedding feast, who at least at some point had the lamp of faith burning. The fact that some are wise and some are foolish bears witness to the truth of the church in this world. This is what we confess about the church: *“Strictly speaking, the Church is the congregation of saints and true believers,”* yet *“many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled within them in this*

Be Prepared; He'll Come Unexpectedly — 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
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life” (Augsburg Confession, VIII:1) — “wheat and tares together sown, unto joy or sorrow grown” (LSB892), as we sing; as Jesus preaches. The difference will only be apparent at the final harvest.

And then, the Bridegroom will come! Jesus “will come again in glory,” we confess, “to judge both the living and the dead” (Nicene Creed). St. Paul says, “*the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first*” — that is, those who, when death visited them, were prepared. The angels bore them home to Abraham’s bosom to await their resurrection at the coming of the Bridegroom. Similarly, those “*who are alive*” at the coming of the Lord and are prepared, that is, faithful believers, “*will be caught up together with [the dead who have been raised, lifted up to] the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*”

When will all this be? No one knows. Jesus sums it up succinctly: “*Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*” That’s the point of being prepared, for the announcement for the coming Bridegroom comes unexpectedly. The virgins all slumbered; all were startled out of their sleep; five entered the wedding feast; five did not; five were prepared; five were not.

Thus, clearly their slumber was not the barrier to entering in, after all, no one can “stay awake always.” Surely, “*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside*” (Rom. 3:10-12). Even wanting to do right, we do wrong “*for sin ... dwells within [us]*” (Rom. 7:17). We are wretched people and bound for eternal death apart from Christ, our Bridegroom, who “*loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*” (Eph. 5:25-27). No, the foolish virgins were not locked out because they had fallen asleep, but because when awakened from their slumber, they were not prepared.

So of what does this oil of preparedness consist, if it’s not the merits of one’s own ability to stay awake and never sin? It could be many things, writes Dr. Jeff Gibbs in his commentary: “*whatever it takes for you to be ready to honor the Bridegroom when he comes again in glory*” (Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1–28:20*, 1323) [italics his].

“Repentance is obviously needed,” he continues, “if one is to be ready to welcome Christ Jesus when he returns, and so is true and humble faith.” That means, I say, a faith created and nurtured and sustained by the word of Christ and His Sacraments. Gibbs again: “Perseverance and courage will be the needed gifts at times, — I would add ‘heartened by prayer’ — and many will be the times

when humility will keep me ever watching. Willingness to suffer for the name of Christ and to deny myself (16:24) are key. Sorrowful awareness of the world's brokenness and a longing for God's name to be hallowed on the earth (6:9)—these, too, can be the oil, ever ready in our vessels. And the list can go on. Whatever it takes to be ready to receive and honor the King when he comes—the parable teaches us to desire those things” (Gibbs, 1323-24).

Dear saints, Scripture reminds us that our time in this age is limited; this is not our permanent home. David sings, *“O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!”* (Ps. 39:4-5) We may be alive when the cry goes forth: *“The Bridegroom comes! Awake!”* Or death may visit us first. Either way, the question is: are you prepared? For there will not be time then to pack your bag, whether you've made a list or not. There will not be time to fill your flask with oil.

You need to be prepared; like military forces called to service in a moment's notice, you need to have your “go bag” ready; you need the flask filled with the oil of preparedness that you may follow without delay to “the wedding hall.” You know how it's done.

Friends, that cry hasn't gone out yet — so, let's add a bit of oil to our lamps today, for today we hear a different call, a call to eat of Christ's supper. Let's eat and drink our forgiveness and prepare ourselves for the thrilling midnight cry!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.