The Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27)
St. Matthew 25:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

If Jesus were to return, say, in the next few days, would you know it? Do you know what to expect? Would you recognize the signs and the events surrounding His return? Well, according to what Jesus once said, there won't be an eye on earth—living or dead, believing or not—who will not know that He is returning when He comes back. (cf. Matthew 24:25-27) So, you will most certainly know that Jesus is returning when the Day comes, expecting it or not—the signs will be given, the events will happen, and you will know. It would also certainly be hard to miss a trumpet sounding and the dead rising from their graves. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16)

"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Watch, Jesus tells you. What does that mean? Why would He say that if you're going to know it when He returns anyway?

Well, for one thing, Jesus' return is something at which to rejoice. And if it's something at which to rejoice, then the whole Church on earth—you included—would wait and watch for Jesus with eager anticipation. This is why, among a few reasons, the Church's constant, vigilant prayer is, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus." "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

For another thing, Jesus is encouraging you to remain ever vigilant for His return for the very fact that you do not know they day or the hour of His return. He may return next hour, tomorrow, next week, next year, or perhaps not even in the years He has given you to walk this earth. So, Jesus tells you to watch, to keep on watching; in other words, always be prepared. You don't know when Jesus is going to return—Jesus, Himself, didn't even know (cf. Matthew 24:36)—so you must be ready all the time for His return. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

That's the point of the parable that Jesus told in today's text. Make what you like of the characters, items, place, and events of the parable, the focus is on the preparedness of five of the virgins versus the lack of the same of the other five. Five were able to be prepared, with lamps and oil enough to wait and not grow weary, while the other five were not.

This begs the question: what exactly is this preparedness? How does one prepare for Jesus' coming again? How is one prepared for it? These questions are especially poignant given the response of the Lord of the wedding feast to the foolish virgins upon their arrival to the closed doors. If the result of the difference between being prepared and unprepared is the Lord saying to the unprepared, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you," then it would be better to be among the prepared.

To understand preparedness in light of Jesus' parable, you have to know what's going on in the parable. All ten virgins were to be guests at the wedding banquet, but not one of them knew when the bridegroom would arrive. So, they would have to be prepared for whenever that would be. The longer he took, the more likely it would be that the virgins would grow weary of waiting, and perhaps some of them weren't prepared for an extended wait as a result. That's the situation in the parable that Jesus told. Five of the virgins, He called them wise, not knowing when to expect the bridegroom, were prepared for an extended wait; you might imagine that they had enough oil to last them through the night, because the feast might start late and last through the night. The other five, He called them foolish, had grown weary of the wait and didn't have the oil to make it, and once the bridegroom had returned, it was too late to get more oil.

Superimpose that over the return of Christ, and you might have the picture already. The one who is prepared, not knowing when Jesus will return, is as prepared for an imminent return as for one which would happen well past their years. The one who is unprepared has grown weary of waiting, so they are not eagerly expecting Christ's return.

This preparation comes from outside of oneself. In other words, you don't do anything to be prepared for Jesus' return. Conversely, you do everything to be unprepared.

What prepares you for Christ's return? Jesus Himself does, and He does it through Word and Sacraments—regular and frequent use of the Word and Sacraments. So, you come here for regular worship services, whereat the Word of God is proclaimed to you and you receive the very body and blood of Jesus Christ in bread and wine, and therein your sins are forgiven you and your faith is strengthened—be that on Sunday or other days on which services are held at God's house. You come also for regular Bible and Confessions studies, whereat the Word of God is proclaimed to you, and your knowledge of the faith is increased. You make use of the Scriptures also in your own regular devotions, and even there Jesus speaks to you through His Word, feeding your faith.

In every case Jesus is proclaimed to you, and the whole counsel of God is given to you. You hear of the incarnation and birth of the Son of God. You hear of the ministry of the Son of God. You hear of the passion, suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. You hear of the ascension of the Son of God and His work at the right hand of majesty as your Prophet, Priest, and King. You hear of the promise that the Son of God made to return, and in that return to take you to Himself to live with Him in His everlasting, glorious kingdom. And every time you hear of the Son of God, you receive the Son of God, and He strengthens your faith, forgives your sins, and gives you everlasting life. This, dear hearers, is the preparation that He gives to you so that you may watch and wait with eager anticipation. "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

But it can be easy to undo all of His work, and if His work is undone, it is all your doing. In light of what it means to be prepared, as God continues to tarry, it is easy to grow weary in waiting for Jesus to return. Your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, and numerous other generations past have been waiting and waited for Jesus' return; now here you are doing the same thing. Are you sure that Jesus will be returning? How are you sure? Isn't that voice in the back of your head asking you these things? Are you beginning to believe it? Has it been saying this for a while? Is it getting harder and harder to quiet and ignore that voice?

If it is, you might be getting ever closer to the point where you doubt Jesus and His promise to return. Jesus says,

> Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:1-3)

And in doubt, you say, "Yeah, I'm not so sure." Old Adam asks the same question that the serpent did in the Garden: "Did God really say…?" (cf. Genesis 3:1) Of course, what is meant by that is, "God didn't really mean to say..." And if you doubt in this area, then you can doubt in all areas, and before you know it, you don't really believe anything of the Word of God. You don't do your regular devotions. Next, you make excuses about Bible study times. Then, you miss one Divine Service, then another, and another, and so on. You end up despising the Word of God. In the end, when Christ returns, you would find the doors closed to you, and you would hear the Lord of the banquet say, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

Of course, there are many other things which can cause you to doubt God's Word, to bring you to unbelief and other great shame and vice. Illness and death, suffering and other struggles in life, anguish and labor, etc.—these are all part of the curse of the fall. And all of these would work in concert against you. But for the sake of the text before you, the weariness of the wait is the primary concern, such that you lack preparedness toward the return of the Son of God, and this to the effect of the dire consequence of not being known by the Lord of heaven: "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

Nevertheless, you can be sure of what Jesus has said; you can be sure that He will keep His promise to return and to take you to be with Him in Paradise. How can you be sure? Because God doesn't lie—Satan is the father of lies, and your flesh is complicit in those lies, but God has never lied to you and He never will. If Jesus said He will come back for you, then He will come back for you. Dear hearers, Jesus *did* say that He will come back for you. You are here, now, having heard Him say just that! And you can be sure of that because He has said other things to you that you can take to heart:

- But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3a)
- Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (John 14:27)
- For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

> "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:24-25)

This good news endures forever. The good new of the Word of God proclaimed to you, preached into you, fed to you, to give, nourish, and strengthen your faith, to prepare you for the return of Christ to bring you to Himself. Worlds will perish, the sun be darkened and the moon destroyed, but the Word of God remains forever—so, too, the one kept in that Word. That's you, and you can only take God's Word for it! Ultimately, I can't do a thing to assuage your doubts of God's Word but to continue to proclaim the Word of God to you. Through that Word, the Holy Spirit is at work to embolden you to take Him at His Word, to trust that when He says something, He means it. Therefore do not doubt, but believe; fear not, Jesus is coming again to take you to Himself, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.