

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *The Time in Between*
Service Theme: *A Time for Watchfulness*

Sermon Theme: *Fuel Up!*
November 12, 2023—Matthew 25:1-13

If you've lived in Florida for very long, you know the routine. Reports surface that the National Weather Service is keeping an eye on a tropical disturbance way out in the ocean somewhere. Soon, the disturbance becomes a depression, and the reports take on a warning tone—this could become a hurricane. As the colorful, squiggly spaghetti models trace toward Florida, Publix parking lots become full, checkout lines get long, shelves quickly empty of bread, bottled water, and toilet paper, and the line of cars at the gas station wraps around the block as everyone fills up their tanks and gas cans. Then we wait and watch to see when, where, and how fiercely the hurricane will arrive.

However, there's also a good possibility that the hurricane will take a turn and end up far away, or weaken and end up no worse than a thunderstorm. Thankfully, all the hurricanes I've experienced so far have been nothing serious like that. But that uncertainty makes being prepared that much more important. Because if you're not prepared, and a serious hurricane does hit, you're in big trouble! As all that activity of hurricane prep shows, an important aspect of preparation is to fuel up—whether that's stockpiling food and water to fuel our bodies, or having enough gasoline to fuel our generators—and most importantly, our AC units!

Jesus also taught his disciples the necessity of being prepared—not for a hurricane, but for Judgment Day! Since we live in ***The Time in Between***—the time between Jesus' first coming as a baby in Bethlehem, and his second coming as Judge of the whole world—we also need to prepare for that unknown day when Jesus will come again! And just like hurricane prep, Jesus uses the parable in today's Gospel to illustrate that an important part of those preparations is to ***Fuel Up!***

Just a few days before his death on the cross and resurrection from the grave, Jesus taught his disciples, ***“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.”***

To fully understand this parable, we need to learn about Israelite weddings. In Jewish culture, weddings took place in the evening. The bride and her bridesmaids would get ready at the bride's home, while the groom and groomsmen spent the day together, kind of like the bachelor party. Then, when evening came, they would travel together to the bride's home to meet up with the bride and bridesmaids. From there, the wedding party would process through the city in joyous, celebratory nighttime parade to the groom's home, where the wedding ceremony and reception took place.

So in Jesus' parable, these ten virgins are likely the bridesmaids, waiting at the bride's home for the groom to arrive. Obviously, if part of the wedding ritual included a nighttime procession through the city, you needed to bring along a light. And since batteries and cellphone flashlights weren't invented yet, that meant bringing enough olive oil to keep their lamps burning.

Five came prepared, but five didn't bring any oil at all. That's pretty foolish, right? For modern application, that would be like a bridesmaid forgetting to bring her dress, or the best man forgetting to bring the rings!

The groom and his groomsmen must have been having too much fun, because they didn't arrive at the bride's house until midnight. I'm sure she was thrilled about that! While they waited, the virgins had all drifted off to sleep, until they were finally awoken by a shout, ***“Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”*** That's when, as the virgins prepared their lamps for the procession, the five foolish ones realized their foolishness. They begged the wise ones to lend them some oil, but the wise ones refused, knowing that if they shared their oil, they wouldn't get all the way there before everyone was in the dark. So the

foolish ones rushed off to find a 24-hour oil salesman. But by the time they got back, the procession had already finished, and the door to the wedding had been shut. The foolish ones cried out to the groom, **“Lord, Lord, open the door for us!”** But he replied, **“Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.”** While the joyful wedding feast was celebrated inside, the foolish virgins were left outside, lamenting their foolish lack of preparedness, and lack of fuel!

It's an interesting parable, but what does it mean for us? Jesus reveals the lesson in the last verse of the text: **“Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”** Jesus uses this parable to warn his followers of their need to prepare for his second coming at Judgment Day. As he teaches here and in the previous chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, **“About that day or hour no one knows...only the Father.”** What we do know is that Jesus will come again—just like those ten virgins knew they’d be meeting the groom and participating in the wedding procession that night. But what we don’t know, and can’t know, is when exactly Jesus will come again! Really, both of those truths necessitate preparation. We know Jesus will come again—so be prepared! But we don’t know when Jesus will come again—so we need to be prepared!

But what exactly does it look like to be prepared for Jesus’ second coming? Through this parable, Jesus teaches us not only that we need to be prepared, but also how we can be prepared.

First, we need to understand Jesus’ intended audience for this parable. We might think he’s telling it to unbelievers unprepared for Judgment Day because of their unbelief—for those people, out there. But actually, Jesus is telling it for us people, in here. You see, the virgins were all invited to the wedding. They were all eagerly awaiting and expecting the groom to come. Their lack of preparedness wasn’t because they didn’t believe in the groom. Which means that Jesus is telling this parable to Christians like us who believe that Jesus will come again, as a warning for us Christians to check our own hearts so that we won’t be found unprepared for Judgment Day too!

So, how can we be prepared? By fueling up! What differentiated the wise virgins from the foolish ones? It wasn’t that the foolish ones fell asleep waiting for the groom to arrive—the wise did that too. Which means that being prepared for Jesus’ second coming doesn’t necessitate that we cloister ourselves away from the world, sitting in a chair staring up at the sky 24/7 so we don’t miss it. Being prepared means that when Jesus comes again, and we hear the voice from heaven cry out, **“Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him,”** we’ll have everything we need. What differentiated the wise from the foolish virgins is that when the time came to be prepared, the wise ones had the fuel they needed, while the foolish ones didn’t.

What’s needed for when Jesus returns? What will he be looking for and judging based on? Faith in him as our Savior! We’re prepared to meet Jesus by simply remaining steadfast in our faith in him as our Savior! So the million dollar question is, what are you doing to fuel that faith? What are you putting in your jar?

What I mean is, the wise virgins **“took oil in jars along with their lamps.”** They filled their jars with fuel, so they were always prepared, whenever the groom would come. What are you filling the jar of your life with? That’s a question that all Christians need to deeply reflect on. Are you filling your jar with money? With your career? With your hobbies? With temporary pleasures? With your health? With your kids? With sports? With education? With fun? With sleep?

Don’t get me wrong, almost all of those are good things, blessings from a gracious God! But good things can become deadly things if we let them become the ultimate thing. We need to identify what good things are distracting us from preparing for Jesus’ second coming! Because rather than fueling our preparation for when the groom comes to call, those things will leave us holding an empty jar. As good and enjoyable as those things might be, they’re doing nothing to prepare you for Judgment Day!

Like the virgins falling asleep waiting for the groom to show up, it can be hard for us Christians to stay prepared when it feels like Jesus is taking too long to come. It’s easy for us to get distracted and lose our

sense of urgency to prepare for Jesus and fuel our faith when it feels like we've got plenty of time to spare. But if we lull ourselves into a sense of complacency or apathy about our faith, we're in grave danger!

Because at any second, we could meet Jesus; whether it's when we die, or when he comes again. One day, the door will be shut forever, and you'll either be inside, celebrating at the wedding feast of the Lamb, or left outside with the Lord saying from inside, "***I don't know you.***" The signs of the end times that Jesus warned about are all around us, meaning he could return at any second!

Turn on the news, and you'll get daily reminders just how fragile and uncertain human life is. In the last year, 2 WELS called workers I know have died shockingly and unexpectedly—a pastor killed by a drunk driver on his morning commute to church; a teacher who had a medical emergency walking out to her car to drive to school.

At literally any unknown second, our earthly lives could end! So please, don't have an attitude of complacency or apathy about fueling your faith! Please, don't put it off, telling yourself you'll worry about yours, or your children's, or your loved one's spiritual lives later on. Because there might not be a later on! We need to fuel up our faith with purpose, intentionality, and urgency! When we do that, it will impact every facet of our lives!

A life prepared for Jesus' return will have a jar filled with the oil that fuels our faith. Every time you're here, speaking, singing, and hearing God's Word and receiving the Sacrament, you're fueling your faith! Would that the lines of cars pulling into our parking lot on Sunday morning wrap around the block like the gas station lines before a hurricane! Every time you're studying God's Word—here at church and Bible Study; for your kids at Sunday School, Teen Bible Study, and Catechism; during your personal devotion time, and family devotion time—you're fueling your faith! Would that the Bible Study sheets and Sunday School packets be snapped up as quickly as bread and bottled water disappears from the shelves before a hurricane!

A jar filled with faith fuel will manifest itself in sacrificial love for our neighbor, and an unabashed desire to share the Gospel of Jesus with others, because we know the time is short! It will manifest itself in a peace, hope, joy, and perseverance in this life that can only come from knowing that the groom is coming, and when he does, he will bring us into the eternal wedding banquet in Heaven!

That's why it's possible for us to wait and watch; to prepare and fuel up for Jesus' second coming. Even when it feels like he's so long in coming. Even when it feels like there are a million reasons in your life that he should have come already. We can wait and watch willingly, joyfully, when we remember what we're waiting and watching, preparing and fueling up for!

No doubt, waiting can be hard. But waiting is worth it when we know we're waiting for something beautiful and wonderful. Waiting for the sun to go down, so you can marvel at a beautiful sunset. Waiting for your family to arrive for the holidays, so you can spend that wonderful time together. Counting down the days until your wedding, in eager anticipation of the incredible joy that awaits you on that day, and every day after.

Likewise, we can wait eagerly and joyfully, preparing and fueling for Jesus' coming again, because just like those wise virgins, we know what we're waiting for something unfathomably joyful and beautiful! The same eternal wedding banquet we heard about and celebrated last Sunday, where the Saints Triumphant have already begun the feast! The eternal wedding banquet where we'll rejoice forever with our groom-- our Savior, Jesus Christ; the one who invited us, opened the door for us with his death and resurrection, and is coming again to lead us and all our fellow believers in grand procession to the eternal wedding feast! Prepare, brothers and sisters in Christ! Fill up your jar with that which fuels your faith, because the bridegroom is coming, and the wedding feast awaits!