

November 12, 2023 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

### Keep Watch!

Aware of the danger  
Eager for the wedding

My friend in college was excited to get home for Thanksgiving. He wanted to go deer hunting. As quickly as he could, he packed his gear and took off for the north woods. He found himself a comfortable spot where he could sit and keep his eyes on a large clearing. Then ... he fell asleep. He woke up when he heard some leaves rustling. He opened his eyes and saw a huge buck sniffing at him. He raised his rifle as slowly and carefully as he could, but, of course, the buck bolted and he was gone. The only thing he brought home from his hunting trip was a cold. He missed an amazing opportunity because he fell asleep. Even more tragic than falling asleep while deer hunting, is falling asleep spiritually. You'll end up missing heaven. Therefore, this morning, Jesus warns us: Keep Watch! Be aware of the danger and be eager for the wedding.

To drive this point home, Jesus told a parable, or story, about a wedding. Wedding customs were different back then. There was not a formal service in a church like we have. Typically, when a couple got engaged, the woman stayed living with her parents while the man started setting up his own home. They did not live together before they were married – a wonderful reminder for our youth in today's culture. When the groom had his new home prepared, the wedding celebration was planned. The bridegroom would walk to his bride's house with friends who celebrated with him along the way. Close friends and relatives of the bride served as her attendants. When the groom came near the house, the bridal attendants went out to meet him with bright lamps, or torches, to light the way and add to the celebration. When the groom arrived at the house, the bride's parents would formally give their daughter away to him. Then the wedding couple, accompanied by friends and relatives went to their new home for the wedding banquet.

In Jesus' story, there were 10 bridal attendants. All 10 had lamps for the wedding procession through the streets. Five had extra oil along with them. The other five did not. Something delayed the bridegroom and it was not until midnight that the cry went out, "**Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!**" By this time the 10 maidens had fallen asleep and the oil in their lamps ran out. Those without any extra oil begged the others for oil. The other five could not give them extra oil or else they would not have enough. In a panic the five foolish maidens scrambled to find more oil. Meanwhile, the wedding procession paraded through the streets and began enjoying the wedding banquet. The 5 foolish maidens finally arrived and desperately knocked on the door to get in. Showing up at the banquet without being part of the grand procession through the streets was like, in our culture, skipping the ceremony, not having a present, but

showing up at the reception for a free meal. It was very impolite. They were told, "**I tell you the truth, I don't know you.**" They missed out on the wedding celebration.

This story is a picture of how Jesus will come at the end of the world to take all believers to heaven. Jesus could not be more emphatic when he said (:13), "**Keep watch.**" A more literalistic translation would be, "More than anything else, keep watching and never let up." After all, our eternal destiny is at stake. We need to be aware of the danger.

### Be aware of the danger

In Jesus' story (:5), "**The bridegroom was a long time in coming.**" God's people have been waiting for 2000 years for Jesus to come. He could come at any moment. We do not want to miss out. Those five foolish maidens knew that it does not take long to burn up oil in a small lamp. They knew that the bridegroom is often late since he is already celebrating with his friends. There was no excuse for not having enough oil. They were irresponsible. It was their fault. Without oil, they were not able to get into the wedding banquet. Without faith we will not enjoy the heavenly wedding banquet. When Jesus comes at the end of the world, he will not give a one day, or two-minute, warning. He will come in a moment, as quickly as you can blink your eyes. There will not be time for someone to say, "Wait, let me dig out my Catechism and review some things." Or, "Give me a moment to walk away from the sin I've been holding onto." No. There is no warning, no mulligan, no second chance. Jesus said, "**Keep watch.**"

All 10 maidens had oil to begin with, that is, all 10 were believers when the story started. They all had faith, but 5 of them lost their faith. Think of Judas. He walked and talked with Jesus for three years. He performed miracles in Jesus' name. He confessed faith in Jesus, but he ended up in hell. It wasn't that he betrayed Jesus for some silver coins. Jesus would die for that sin, too. It was that Judas did not believe that Jesus would forgive him. He lost his faith.

All of you know people, often friends and relatives, who were once walking closely with Jesus, but now they never come to church and do not live a Christian lifestyle. It breaks your heart. I've talked with many such people. They'll tell me that they went to Sunday School or a Lutheran Elementary School and they know their Bible stories. They do not realize that head knowledge about Jesus is not the same as saving faith in the heart. Judas knew more about Jesus than we do, but he is not in heaven. I've also had many tell me how their parents or grandparents were involved with the church, as if that gives them credit points with God. Just like the 5 wise maidens could not share their oil with the 5 foolish maidens, no one can believe for someone else.

Outwardly, the 5 foolish maidens looked just like the 5 wise maidens. They were all dressed up, had their hair looking fancy and wore their best jewelry. This is a reminder to us that an outward form of godliness is not enough. God

sees into the heart. Coming to church, living a moral lifestyle, supporting the ministry with your offerings and efforts are great, but the devil is a sneaky enemy. So easily, he can shift our focus from looking to Jesus to looking to our own good works. Certainly, our hearts break that others have lost their faith in Jesus, but we also need to be aware of the danger facing us.

I have never met anyone who woke up one morning and said, "I'm going give up Jesus and become an unbeliever." But I have seen many times when people don't get to church because they are out of town or at some sporting event or something else. Then, a few weekends later, they skip church to get some extra projects done around the house. And then, the next week, they are just too tired and sleep in. And pretty soon, Jesus is pushed to the side and forgotten. Many have told me, "I don't HAVE to go to church to be a believer." True. I usually respond, "Going to an airport does not make you an airplane, but if you are an airplane, you belong at the airport. And if you're a believer, you belong at church." Others have told me, "We'll get their eventually," but eventually never comes. Others get caught up in some sin and they refuse to let go. If you don't think that you need this warning to be aware of the danger of losing your faith, then you are in danger. If you go through life thinking, "Well, of course I'm a wise maiden! I don't have to worry about anything," St. Paul says (1 Cor 10:12), "Be careful that you don't fall." Be careful not to live life as though the gift of faith is some lucky rabbit's foot rather than a lamp that's been lit within you that constantly needs to be fueled with the oil of the gospel. When Jesus told us to "Keep watch," he is reminding us that there is a danger we need to watch out for.

#### Be eager for the wedding

I have had the privilege of "standing up" in a few weddings, being part of the wedding party. Lots of fun. Maybe you've been part of a few wedding parties as well. How did that happen? Did you fill out an application? Did you simply tell the bride and groom, "I'm going to stand up in your wedding." No. You do not appoint yourself or volunteer. You have to be asked by the bride and groom. You do not make yourself a member of the wedding party.

In the same way, none of us made ourselves Christians. We did not fill out an application explaining to God how good we are and how much we want to be in heaven. On the contrary, we were his enemies. All of us were born sinful as enemies of God. We did not want to spend time with him or listen to his Word. We resisted his efforts to touch our hearts. But Jesus, the heavenly bridegroom, was in love with you and would not give up. He came into this world as a cute baby that we were drawn to. He gave his life to save the world, including you. In fact, Jesus did more than just make you a member of the wedding party. He made you his bride, his beloved.

Instead of a beautiful bride, though, you may feel like a dirty sinner as the devil reminds you of everything you've done wrong. You may feel like a loser who

failed at so many things in life. You may feel that God would overlook you and ignore you just as so many other people do. But when you passed through the waters of baptism, Jesus grabbed ahold of you and won you over with his love. He wrapped you up with his pure white perfection and made you holy. He promised to be faithful to you no matter what. He promised that he was going to go to heaven to prepare a home for you and that he will return to take you to be with him. His love endures forever.

Jesus is coming for you. The cry rings out (:6), "**Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!**" Look carefully at Jesus as he gets closer. It looks like he just got out of a fight. His face is bruised as if someone beat him up. His clothes are stained with blood, his own blood that's dripping from his head, his back, his hands, his feet, his side. As he reaches out to you, you can see the holes in his hands. You can see the spear wound in his side that punctured his heart and proved that he was dead. But that heart is still beating, beating with love for you. He came back from the dead and said (John 14:19), "**Because I live, you also will live.**" Even though he was mortally wounded, he smiles brightly and says (Jeremiah 31:3), "**I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving kindness.**" Your sins are forgiven and there is a place prepared for you in paradise. The bridegroom is coming! He is coming for you! He eager we are for the wedding.

Therefore, we will take to heart his words, "**Keep watch!**" We will not get spiritually lazy. That means that we will not just make it a priority to get to church, but we will stay focused on the words that are being said and sung. We will constantly watch out for temptations and turn away from them, avoiding them like COVID. It takes a concentrated effort, like staying on your diet or an exercise routine. As I pondered this story all week long, I found myself listening to a lot more Christian music because it helped me stay focused on Jesus and strive to live a Christian life. We need to keep examining our hearts. Pray often and pray sincerely, from the heart, not just mumbling the same recited thing over and over again. Falling asleep while you're hunting might cost you a big buck. But falling asleep spiritually will cost you heaven. Our eternal destiny is at stake and we will make sure that we are ready. We will constantly keep watch as we pray (Revelation 22:20), "**Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come and take us home!**" Amen.