The Last Sunday of the Church Year

20 November, Anno Domini 2016

St. Matthew 25:1-13

Pastor Kurt A. Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Disasters and upheaval seem to be mounting on every side. Jesus said “So also, when you see all these things, you know that the end is near, at the very gates.” When the fierce, tearing winds of a tornado rip our house apart and drop our belongings hundreds of miles away, when hail as big as your fist pound through your roof and vehicles, when politicians and governments fall deeper into corruption and threaten the preaching of the Gospel and the living of the Christian faith, is it safe to say that the end is near? Is Jesus standing at the gates about ready to call for the final trumpet blast, ready to send out His angels to the four corners of the earth and bring the living and the dead together for the judgment of all flesh? Maybe. Maybe this is the last time we will meet together as a congregation before we are transferred to eternal glory. Maybe I won’t even finish this sermon. Maybe our Lord’s return won’t be for another 2000 years. Maybe.

But that’s not the question we need to concern ourselves with. The real question is whether or not you’re ready? If you can answer that question then the “When” doesn’t matter. Are you prepared for that day whether it’s today or still several millennia away? You see, the devil is the master of distraction. Since the beginning he has been getting people to obsess about the “when” of Jesus’ coming. That sounds like a good idea, right? But questions of when quickly lead to questions of why. Why did this happen to us? Why did we have to lose our house, our savings, our health, our child? Do you remember from Bible Class when the disciples questioned Jesus about the man born blind, whether it was his own sin or the sin of his parents that caused the blindness? Jesus didn’t assign blame because that isn’t how God works. Instead, Jesus says that the man’s blindness was a blessing, so that the works of God might be seen in him. And with that Jesus reached out and worked the works of God – healing, restoring, unseating Satan from his throne. Why do things like tornados and hurricanes happen? So that the works of God might be seen. Take comfort in knowing this, dear children of God, that whatever cross or suffering is sent to you, your heavenly Father is working through it to His glory and your salvation. Only wait with prayer and patience and commit yourself to merciful care of your dear Father in heaven.

Ten virgins were waiting for the bridegroom. Ten believers, with lamps burning bright went out to wait. Ten saints, with robes made white in the blood of Lamb through the waters of Holy Baptism, eagerly went out to greet their Lord. Five of them were foolish, virgins, Christians, but fools – they thought they were strong. Five of them believed that once saved, always saved. Five of them didn’t take seriously the dangers that lurk in the dark night of this world. Five of them trusted in their own faith, that they could just read the Bible at home and be fine. But the bridegroom was delayed. The colorless, odorless gas of temptation crept up on them and filled their minds and hearts with promises of comfort and pleasure. And they succumbed. The wait was too long and too hard. The crosses were too heavy. They indulged their flesh. They doubted that the bridegroom would actually return. Their sufferings convinced them that God didn’t love them, that there was no use in being prepared. They despised the Means of Grace, the oil that holds forth the light of God’s mercy in Jesus to show us the way to the bridegroom, to sustain us in faith. They thought they could do without them. They thought they could keep themselves ready. They were wrong. They fell into sin and had despised the Means of forgiveness. The door was shut. Time had run out. The bridegroom had arrived and the time of preparation was over. They wouldn’t be let in because at one point they had believed, because forty years ago they had been instructed and confirmed. Their faith in the work of Christ had long burned away to nothing because it had not been fed. They couldn’t be saved by the faith or works of someone else. “The words ‘for you’ require all hearts to believe." They allowed their faith to be snuffed out. They were shut out. And what they heard last were the most terrible words anyone could ever imagine coming out of the mouth of Jesus “I do not know you.”

Five of them were wise. They trusted neither themselves nor their works. They believed that in mercy they had been cleansed. They also believed that they were yet sinners, still weak, still full of doubt, still susceptible to the flesh, still powerless against the ruler of this world who stalked them from the shadows. They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and the fellowship. They drank in the preaching of Christ’s undershepherds that held forth the blood of Jesus poured out from Calvary’s cross for sinners like them. They took comfort and encouragement from those who shared in their confession. They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers. They hungered for the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, the Body and Blood of Jesus, because their Lord had promised to give forgiveness, life and salvation through that holy food. Even in the latest and darkest watches of the night their prayers ascended to the throne of grace in their time of need. But the bridegroom was delayed. Their eyes grew heavy in the dark night of sin as they waited. They, like the foolish virgins, fell asleep. They gave up the watch and fell into sin. They gossiped. They committed adultery. They became angry. They doubted. They were not better or stronger than the first five. They sinned. They gave up watching. But their lamps were full, full of God’s mercy and forgiveness. They were repentant sinners who hadn’t set aside the death of Christ for their own works or faith. They knew that every day they walked in danger because they weren’t yet safely inside with the bridegroom. And so when Jesus returned, they were ready. Not because they had lived holier lives, were more pious, or had committed less serious sins. They were ready because their lamps were filled with the work of Jesus, the mercy of his atoning death for their failure to keep watch. They were let in because they believed that Jesus loved them even though they had fallen asleep, even though they had done all the things that they weren’t supposed to.

During the long wait, under the weight of the appointed cross, the foolish virgin asks “Why?” The foolish virgin wants to fill her lamp with more than the cross and the empty tomb, more than the proclamation of Jesus and Him crucified, more than Baptism, more than the Body and the Blood, more than Christ. But there simply isn’t more. There is no other oil. Jesus is the one who sustains us until He Himself returns. The wise virgin knows and believes nothing about God except what she sees and hears in Jesus. She doesn’t judge God’s love for her by the disease that is consuming her body, by the pile of rubble that was once her house, by the guilt that lies under her white robe, or by her own weakness of faith. All she knows and trusts is the Lamb of God who took away her sins and who promised to shepherd her through this shadow of death, who promised that her heavenly Father would give her everything she needs to support this body and life.

Is the night wearing on? Are the pressures of this world and the temptations of its pleasures weighing your eyelids down? Are your cross and burden heavy with no end in sight? Is your guilt causing you despair? Come have your lamp filled with the Blood of your Savior – Blood that was shed so that your sin and guilt could no longer harm you; Blood that strengthens you in faith toward God and in fervent love toward one another. Don’t trouble yourself with the whys or the whens. Instead, come and trim your lamps with the love and mercy of your Savior. The bridegroom is coming. Come and meet Him this day, enjoy this foretaste of the feast to come, so that He may prepare you to join Him at the banquet table of heaven when He comes again.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.