The Last Sunday of the Church Year
St. Matthew 25:1-13
22 November, Anno Domini 2026

Beloved of God,

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

With all the recent talk about AI, about wars and rumors of wars, the heavily publicized computer system outages, and governments around the world encouraging people to have three months of emergency supplies, everyones' minds are swirling about societal collapse and things pertaining to the end of the world. Jesus said "So also, when you see all these things, you know that the end is near, at the very gates." 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. Then again, maybe our Lord's return won't be for another 2000 years. Maybe. Regarding the end we know only two things. One, Jesus **will** return for judgment just as He promised. And two, that day will come upon us suddenly, like a trap, because there is no way for us to know when it will take place.

The real question is are you 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? And even if the Lord doesn't return during your lifetime, are you ready for the day when your time on this earth is over? Is your mind set on things above, where Christ is? Or are your thoughts consumed by earthly things, things that are passing away, things that will be of no help to you when you stand before the judgment seat of God? The devil is the master of distraction. Since the beginning he has been getting people to obsess about being able to live their best life or figuring out the "when" of Jesus' coming. And it <u>seems</u> like that is a helpful question to consider, right? If we know <u>when</u> the Master of the house is coming, then we can be sure to be ready for Him. 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? Why is the cost of everything keep accelerating upwards? Such questions only lead down rabbit holes of despair as we are confronted by the mountain of our sin. Do you remember when the disciples questioned Jesus about the blind man, 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 sicknesses and outages and natural disaster happen? So that the works of God might be seen by those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

And as overwhelming as that work of God may be, providing for us in all times of our earthly need, bringing relief in the midst of our earthly afflictions, there is a far greater work of God that we are to always hold in front of us. In Luke 13 we hear that some came to Jesus to ask if the suffering and death others endured were brought upon them because they were worse sinners than others. But Jesus turned the tables on them. They were trying to sneak a peek into that part

of God's will that hasn't been revealed to us. It is only arrogant sinful men who like to justify themselves who would look at someone else's destruction and try to determine just how bad a sinner they must have been. The same doubt and unbelief of our Old Adam leads God's own children to ask "why", to doubt the sufficiency of Jesus' death for their sin, to doubt the promise made to them in Holy Baptism, to suddenly think that their cross means that God doesn't love them. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

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. Five of them trusted in themselves, that they were righteous, and that the devil, the world, and their own flesh posed no threat to them. 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. 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 oil which Christ had provided in abundance through His cross. 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 they didn't bother to support it, to feed and nourish it on the Word of God and the Sacrament of the Altar. They couldn't be saved by the faith and works of someone else. "The words 'for you' require all hearts to believe." 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.

Durng 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 Christ and Him crucified, more than Baptism, more than the Body and the Blood. 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 who won the last election or how the economy is going, 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.

This is how the Lord prepares us so that whether He returns today or our earthly life ends before His return, we are ready. Readiness is not in being a better person. Readiness is being found clinging in faith to Jesus, trusting that He truly has atoned for your sins and covered you in His own righteousness. This is the whole reason that Jesus instituted the sacraments. He wants you to be filled with certainty regarding your redemption. For the same reason our homes are to be filled with the Word of God from morning to night. Our days are to be ordered around the things of God's kingdom, not the things of the world. If at any time we find ourselves saying to ourselves or to others "We just have too much on our plate to gather around God's Word each day. We are so busy with work and school and extracurricular activities that we just don't have time" that's when you know the devil has got you distracted from the things of eternal life to run in circles around the things of the world. But none of those things will matter on the Last Day. Indeed, they may be the very things that condemn you because instead of filling yourself and your children with God's Word, hearing and receiving the promises of the holy sacraments, you relegated those things to the back seat so that you and they did well in this life and sought to enjoy some measure of success and earthly comfort. Take heed to the warning of the rich man and Lazarus. Feed faith at every turn. Orient your thoughts and your days around the Word of God. Don't let worldly things keep you from receiving Christ's Body and Blood. Pray without ceasing. Confess your sins and receive Christ's absolution. Be quietly faithful in your vocations as you wait and pray for the return of Jesus. He is faithful. He will grant you perseverance to the end through the means He Himself has appointed.

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 so that He may prepare you to join Him at the banquet table of heaven when He comes again in His glory.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus so that you may meet Him with joy when He returns on the clouds.