

Keep Watch
Matthew 25:1-13
November 12, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

Context here is important. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago. A little review can't hurt. Chapter twenty-four in Matthew's Gospel is about the signs of the end of the age. The disciples asked Jesus, "...what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" Jesus answered them and said there will be false messiahs. Followers of Jesus will be persecuted. There will be false prophets. There will be wars and rumors of more wars. There will be natural disasters. The bottom line is no one knows when the end of the age will be. No one knows when Jesus will come back. Jesus said he didn't know. Only God knows.

Chapter twenty-five, then, is all about what we should be doing while we are waiting for the return of Jesus. The chapter ends with that account of how the sheep will be separated from the goats when Jesus returns. Two weeks ago—Stewardship Sunday—we talked about how we are not to be lazy while waiting for Jesus to return. God has entrusted us with gifts and talents. We must use them...and not bury them and sit around and wait.

The chapter begins with this story of ten virgins.

Now just a quick and brief reminder about some of the first century Jewish wedding customs. Weddings were very elaborate affairs. The groom went to the bride's father with a proposal of marriage. They would discuss the potential union. These discussions included a bit of negotiating. There was the matter of the price offered by the groom for the bride. By the way, as you no doubt know, this wedding deal is a prominent metaphor throughout Scripture. Jesus is the bridegroom. We—the Church—are the

bride. The price Jesus offered up for us was his life. When Jesus prayed in the garden "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass by me", it was almost like he was negotiating. "Father, is there some other deal that could be made here?" Anyway, once the father of the bride and the groom reached an agreement, they drank a little wine to seal the deal.

The groom then went home. But he first assured his bride that he would return for her. The groom then went about the business of preparing the home they would live in after the wedding. This home often consisted of an addition the groom built onto his father's house. We might be remembering just now how Jesus told the disciples he was going away. He told them that there were many rooms in his Father's house, and he was going there to prepare a place. He gave the assurance he would come back...and that they...and we...would be with him. It usually took the groom about a year to build this place.

During this time the bride and the groom were considered engaged or espoused or betrothed. This betrothal was so binding that the only way to break it was through an actual bill of divorcement. It was during this betrothal time when the angel Gabriel came to Mary and basically said, "Have I got news for you...."

The typical Jewish wedding took place at night. The groom would come to the bride's home to get his bride. The moving of lighted torches signaled the groom's approach. People would shout out, "The bridegroom is on his way." There was a party-type atmosphere all along the way. When the bride heard the announcement of her approaching groom, she would stop whatever she was doing. She would don her wedding gown. She, along with her bridesmaids, then ran out to meet the groom. The groom did not enter the bride's house. The bride went to meet him. The

two, along with the entire wedding party, then went to the groom's home for the marriage. Remember...it was night...dark...so fully charged batteries for the flashlights would be needed...or plenty of oil for the lamps or torches.

This was followed by a seven-day celebration.

So Jesus told this story. His hearers could relate. A pretty straight-forward story.

Jesus began the story, as he began most of his stories, with a general, introductory statement. He began with, "At that time...." The time to which he referred was what he talked about in chapter twenty-four. "That time" is the end of the age...the time of his return. At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. The groom was coming to get his bride. We are then told that five were wise, and five were foolish. The foolish ones did not take extra oil for their lamps. The wise ones had plenty of oil.

Then come the details. At midnight—it was dark—the cry rang out. "Here's the bridegroom. Come out to meet him." The foolish asked the wise for some of their oil. The wise refused. If they spared some of their oil, then all ten might be left out in the dark. The foolish bridesmaids went to buy some oil. I guess there would be an oil shop open at midnight. While they were away, the bridegroom arrived. The wedding party and other guests went into the banquet. The door was shut. The foolish ones came to the banquet late. They wanted to get in. And the bridegroom not only refused them entrance, he said he did not even know them.

Okay.... So where we going with this?

I want to talk for a couple of minutes about surprises. And let me anticipate something here. As I talk, some will think, "Yeah, but..." Or, "But what about this?" There are always exceptions. I am talking generally...and for just a few paragraphs...not a dissertation. But do you like surprises? Generally speaking, do you like surprises? A surprise is some unexpected event or thing...like a surprise party...an unexpected

fact. Some synonyms for "surprise" are, "shock", or, "shocker", "bolt from the blue", "bombshell", "revelation", "rude awakening", "eye-opener", "wake-up call".

For the most part—for the most part—I do not like surprises. There are a few people who know this little fact about me. Those who know it are sometimes annoyed by it. A few who are often annoyed by it. But my preference is to be prepared. My preference is to know what is coming. And so when at the last minute, there comes that unexpected fact or thing—that bolt from the blue, so to exaggerate—well, I'll admit, I could probably handle that a bit better. Now I'm not saying everyone should be like this. Probably better not to be. But, hey, it's me.

Remember...I said quite plainly that for the most part I am not into being surprised. Because...you see, there are times...like...a few years ago. Halloween. We give out candy. There are plenty of kids in our neighborhood. We buy plenty of candy. I do not want to be surprised by too many kids and run out of candy. So we get plenty. Butterfingers. My favorite. That way I'll enjoy the excess.

Laurie and I answer the door in shifts. This one year there came a ringing of the doorbell. It was my turn. I opened the door, my arm wrapped around a big bowl of Butterfingers. There was this cute little girl dressed in a princess costume. I did one of those kind of closer-look, recognition things. It was my granddaughter! Wow! She had come a long way for one of Grandpa's Butterfinger candy bars. We went to other houses in the neighborhood. She spent the night with us. The next year, the same thing happened. Only then it was my grandson in a Batman outfit.

Now do you think I was annoyed by this little unexpected surprise? "Unexpected surprise", by the way, is redundant, but I say it for emphasis. Of course, I was not the least bit annoyed. Here's another thing many of you know about me. I love my family. I love my children. You know I adore my grandchildren. I cannot see enough of them. And when they show up out of the blue, I am always ready. My love for them is all the ready I need.

A simple analogy. Don't push it too far. But it would appear there were five bridesmaids who were a bit surprised by the appearance of the bridegroom. They really should not have been. They knew he would be arriving at some point.

Jesus' point in telling the story is really a pretty basic one. He said there would be an end to the age. He would return. We do not know that day or hour. But he will come back. So what do we do? We watch. We stay prepared. We are in a constant state of readiness. How do we stay ready and prepared?

Last week we talked about the greatest commandment. Love. The first part of that commandment is we love God with all we have and with all we are. Right now our attitude ought to be that we just cannot get enough of God...we just cannot see enough of God. So we'll pray. We'll read and study the Word. We'll worship and praise. We'll think of God and meditate upon God. We'll serve God. Our love for God will grow.

Then Jesus will return. Will we be surprised? You bet we will be. The very fact we don't know the day or hour implies there will be some surprise. But we know it will happen. And when it does—surprise—we will be prepared. We will be ready. We'll be ready because we just love and adore God so much that we'll throw wide the gates to our hearts. Welcome!

Watch. Grow more in love with God today.

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."