November 8, 2026 Pentecost 24
Matthew 25:1-13 Pastor Jeff Laustsen

"Thy Kingdom Shall Come"

"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Be careful what you wish for.

In the 1988 movie *Big,* thirteen-year-old Josh Baskin is frustrated after being told he cannot go on a carnival ride because he is too short. Dejected, he inserts a coin into an antique fortune telling machine called Zoltar and makes a wish that he might be "big." The next morning, Josh wakes up and discovers that his wish has been granted; he has grown into an adult overnight. This granted wish leads to unintended consequences for Josh: his mother thinks he is a kidnapper and throws him out of the house, his friends at school do not recognize him, and he is left homeless and frightened. It is only his best friend Billy who recognizes Josh and helps him find a room to rent in New York City, where the newly grown Josh finds that his wish has not resulted in the better days he had expected. While he goes on a series of adventures that make use of his child's view of the world, Josh discovers that he should have been more careful about what he had wished for; when he finds the fortune machine again, he wishes to be a child and returns to the life for which he has gained a new appreciation.

Be careful what you wish for.

One of the many memorable songs of the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* is the hit single *Wouldn't It Be Nice,* in which two young people who have fallen in love wish that they could be older so they would not have to wait to begin their life together:

- "Wouldn't it be nice if we were older? Then we wouldn't have to wait so long. And wouldn't it be nice to live together in the kind of world where we belong? You know it seems the more we talk about it, it only makes it worse to live without it … Oh, wouldn't it be nice?"

The lyrics do not indicate what happens to this young couple, but many people who yearn for a time when they are older and no longer have to wait discover that the reality of their future does not live up to their dreams, that sadly for many couples

"happily ever after fails" when they are faced with the realities of adulthood and relationships.

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For the people of Israel, the day for which they looked forward to arriving was the "Day of the LORD" (*yom Yahweh*) the day they expected God to return to reward God's people for their faithfulness, especially for their devotion to worshipping God in the magnificent sanctuary they had built. But when the prophet Amos comes into their presence proclaiming the "word of the LORD," the message about the coming day of the LORD is not one of reward and celebration but a day of judgment and lament:

- "Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" – Amos 5:18-20.

Amos proclaims that the Day of the LORD will be a day of judgment because far from being a people who have walked in the ways of the LORD by obeying the Torah as God's holy people, the people of Israel have enriched themselves through oppressing the poor and enriching themselves while others have starved. They have assumed falsely that their wealth is a reward from God for their righteousness: *"For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy at the gate"* (5:12). Compounded their sinfulness and faithlessness to the LORD is the fact that in this era of the Divided Kingdom the people to whom Amos prophecies are worshipping at Bethel, not at the Temple in Jerusalem where the LORD dwelled among the people: *"For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Geer-sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing."* (5:5). The judgment of the LORD that Amos proclaims to the people of the Northern Kingdom is so harsh that it even speaks of how God rejects the worship of which they are so proud:

- "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I

will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." – 5:21-24.

Amos laments over the complacency of people who assume that only good can come to them, since they are the people of God. They falsely believe that the Day of the LORD was the time when God would appear to bless the people, a day when the LORD would defeat the enemies of Israel and restore the nation to the greatness it enjoyed during the halcyon days of David and Solomon. Amos warns them that the Day of the LORD to which they have been eagerly anticipating will instead be a day of judgment and condemnation; it is not a rejection of the manner in which they are worshipping but a rejection of the worshippers. God does not accept the worship of those who show no interest in justice in their daily lives; what goes on in society must correspond with what is said and done in worship.

- "In effect Amos is saying that the worship of the community is unacceptable because Israel does not live as the community of Yahweh. They are to desert the sanctuaries, renew righteousness by recognizing and fulfilling their responsibilities to their neighbours, and see that rightness bears fruit in the justice of the courts … Justice and righteousness must roll down like the floods after the winter rains, and persist like those few wadis whose streams do not fail in the summer drought. That is, the response should swell with sudden force and continue unabated." – James Luther Mays

Be careful what you wish for.

As we approach the end of the church year, our Gospel lessons focus on Jesus' teachings concerning the Kingdom of Heaven, which is both the content of his teaching ministry and the hope to which he points his followers. Today's Gospel Lesson is often known as the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, in which Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven as a time in which *"ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom"* (Matthew 25:1). While we know little about marriage customs among the people of Israel at the time of Jesus' life and ministry, one detail about his parable that seems unusual is that there is no mention of the bride; the bridesmaids only deal with the bridegroom. The parable is an allegory constructed to illustrate and emphasize Jesus' teaching to his followers about being ready for the coming of the Lord despite the apparent delay. In this allegory, the bridegroom is Jesus at his eschatological banquet, which is clear in earlier use of this imagery in Matthew:

- "And Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'" – 9:15.
- "Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.'" – 22:1-3.

This identification of the bridegroom with Jesus can also be seen in his being addressed as Lord (*"Lord, lord, open to us"* – 25:11) and in the bridegroom's use of the solemn pronouncement formula frequently used by Jesus (*"Truly I tell you, I do not know you"* – 25:12).

The bridesmaids in this allegory represent the church, the body of Jesus' followers who are divided between five who are foolish and five who were wise, the determining factor being if they are ready for the *Parousia,* the coming of the Lord. They all have lamps and oil, and all sleep, but only some are really prepared for Jesus' return when he comes. The "wise" and "foolish" terminology corresponds to the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in which two men build houses that superficially appear alike but only one of which is built wisely and built to last:

- "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like the wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like the foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!" – 7:21-24.

For reasons that are not explained *"the bridegroom was delayed,"* and as a result *"all of them became drowsy and slept."* (25:5); this may be a reference to those who at the time of the writing of Matthew's Gospel who thought that the *Parousia* would never take place as well as those who counted on a long delay, mistakenly assuming that they still had time to prepare. The bridegroom's sudden arrival is the coming of the Lord, with the same phrase *"come out to meet him"* Paul uses in one of his earliest letters (*"Then those who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so, we will be with the Lord forever."* – 1 Thessalonians 4:17). Since Jesus sets the parable in the context of his proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven, this shows that the kingdom has a future aspect, and that the final coming for which the church prays is identical to the

Parousia of the Son of Man: *"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* (6:10).

- "That is why we do not pray, 'Let us come into your kingdom,' as if we should run after it, but 'may your kingdom come to us.' For the grace of God and his kingdom, with all the virtues thereof, must come to us, if ever we are to inherit it. Of ourselves we can never come to the kingdom. Similarly, Christ came to us from heaven to earth; we did not ascend from earth into heaven to him." – Martin Luther.

One of the mysteries of this parable is the significance of the oil to light the bridesmaids' lamps. As oil is critical for the lamp to function as a source of light, what will count at the *Parousia* are deeds of love and mercy in obedience to Christ's commandment to *"love your neighbour as yourself"* (22:39, Leviticus 19:18). Oil was a symbol in Jewish tradition of good deeds; for those who follow Jesus, proper preparation for his return involves responsible deed of discipleship, not constant "watching" for the end. The futile attempt to buy oil after the arrival of the bridegroom (*"The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'"* – 25:8) show the futility of trying to prepare when it is too late (*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven"* – 7:21). Having the right confession of faith without the corresponding faithful life is ultimately disastrous.

- "Faith belongs to heaven above; works must be related to earth. Faith is directed to God, works to the neighbour. Faith is above the law and is outside of the law. Works are placed under the law and are the slaves of the law." – Luther, 15:25.

Faithful disciples are those who do their duty at appropriate times and are thus prepared for the *Parousia* when it comes. Such disciples can lie down to sleep with confidence rather than being kept awake by panic and last-minute anxiety.

- "Readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this for a short time, but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness." – M. Eugene Boring.

The lesson of this parable may be summed up in the injunction to *"keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour"* 25:13). A person makes themselves ready for the Lord's arrival by dutiful fulfillment of responsibilities. The oil corresponds with the performance of good works, as in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus compares good deed to the light of the lamp that must shine before others:

- "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." – 5:14-16.

As oil gives the lamp the fuel it needs to fulfill its function of providing light that will provide light in the darkness, the "oil" of the light we are called to shine before others is the good deeds we perform so that we might be living witnesses to the light of Christ which *"shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."* (John 1:5).

Be careful what you wish for.

As we gather for worship as God's people this morning, we will once again join in the words of the Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus gave his followers at the Sermon on the Mount, the prayer Jesus gives in response to his disciple's request of *"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."* (Luke 11:1). The Lord's Prayer is the central prayer of our faith, a prayer we are entrusted to teach our children when they are baptized, the prayer we pray by ourselves and in diverse gatherings, the prayer that provides a guide for us in our lives of prayers as the people of God. Among its petitions is the request of God that *"thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"* a petition Luther describes for us in his *Small Catechism:*

- "In fact, God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us … whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through the Holy Spirit's grace we believe God's holy word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity."

When we pray this petition, we are asking that God's reign might be accomplished among us, that we may be the instruments of God's Will in the world, and that God's purposes might be accomplished now and in the fullness of time. We ask that God might have *"first place in everything"* (Colossians 1:15), and that we might be the

earthen vessels to *"give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ … so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us"* (2 Corinthians 4:6-7). We pray that God's purposes might be accomplished in and through us so that *"we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9).

- "The eschatology of the Lord's Prayer does not simply gaze into the future; it presses us to live the ethics of God's realm on earth, in which we are brothers and sisters of one Father … This kingdom/realm/reign of God is a realm of justice and faithful love, peace and truth. All of the qualities of God's justice and faithfulness governing our relationships with each other and with God are encompassed by this small but powerful phrase … assuring us that God's realm will come to earth, regardless of our present conflict and distress." – Douglas John Hall.

Wishful thinking – about being older or taller, waiting impatiently for the arrival of an important person or occasion – can have unexpected, life-changing consequences for those who make such wishes. When we wish for the coming of God's Kingdom, we are not acting out of selfish interest or personal anxiety but are calling upon God to fulfill all that God has promised to us and to all God's people. Our watching and waiting is an act of faith, as is our commitment to shining the light of our good deeds as the oil that will illumine the presence of God to a world living in darkness.
Indeed, we should *"be careful of what you ask for"* – it may change our lives and change our world!

Amen.