ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 8, 2026 – PENTECOST 24 / PROPER 27 (YR. A) The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: *"Be Prepared . . . to Wait"*[*]

Wisdom of Solomon 6:13-20	(To fix one's thoughts on wisdom is perfect understanding)
Psalm 70	(A plea for God's help and deliverance)
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18	(Our hope is in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ)
St. Matthew 25:1-13	(Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids)

Have you ever driven on the Turnpike or a superhighway when an electronic sign appeared overhead and in large amber letters warned: "Stay Awake. Stay Alive"? I have. And remembering that, I realized this is Jesus' message for us in today's Gospel.

The parable of the bridesmaids is taken from what scholars call the Olivet Discourse in Matthew, chapters 24 and 25. This is Jesus' extended sermon about His Second Coming, in which He teaches about the importance of His followers staying alert and prepared, of being ready for and awaiting His return. Those of us who believe in Christ must always carry with us a sense of His imminent return—which could even be tonight or tomorrow. We simply do not, and cannot know when. Jesus says in Mark 13:32, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Even so, today's Gospel lesson reminds us that we are to be well-prepared for Christ's coming again, whether it be soon, or a long way off.[1]

But let's face it. Procrastination is a universal human experience. We all put off doing things we're supposed to do. We figure we'll get around to them eventually. Students receive assignments at the beginning of the term, then end up pulling "all-nighters" just before finals in order to finish their papers on time. Children, given a certain amount of time to complete their chores, inevitably wait until the last minute, then scurry around frantically trying to get the tasks done. And when it comes to Christmas shopping, many men cannot get themselves together to shop for their wives, kids, or grandchildren any earlier than December 23rd or 24th. And of course, it's the parishioner who lives closest to the church who's invariably the last one in the door, or even late.

For some reason, when we think we have lots of time, we become lazy and inattentive. We slip into a state of inertia that can be hard to snap out of when time starts running short. Jesus lived and walked this earth more than 2,000 years ago and by now that's been a *very* long time. (Although we should remember, as 2 Peter 3:8 tells us: "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.")

For more than two millennia, believers have been in the difficult position of trying to live as though our Lord might return at any moment. And yet, with each passing year our awareness grows that He still has not come back. This seemingly endless waiting can cause us to become complacent about Christ coming back <u>at all</u>, when the reality is, our Lord's return <u>could be</u> any day now. Increasingly, prophetic men and women are warning that we are either in, or approaching, "the end times," or "the last days," and Christ may *indeed* return soon. In Matthew 24:42, Jesus warns: "be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Because Jesus knew how difficult it would be for believers to wait for thousands of years, He told a couple of stories to help us think about how we should live in light of His mysteriously long physical, visible, absence. One story was about ten bridesmaids at a wedding. In order to make sense of today's parable, we need to understand ancient Jewish marriage customs. The bridegroom was often a more important figure than the bride and frequently paid for all the expenses of the wedding. A Jewish marriage unfolded in three acts: First, there was the formal engagement or betrothal, almost always arranged by the parents of the future bride and groom.

Later—up to a year or more—came the formal religious ceremony in the bride's home. Last, there was the wedding feast, a banquet that took place generally at night, at the groom's house. This lavish affair might last for a week and certainly cost a lot of money. As such, it was a sought-after social event which the couple's friends were eager to attend.

As the newlyweds strolled toward the wedding banquet, their bridesmaids would take part in the 'welcoming ceremony' by lighting the way with lamps they held aloft. A bridesmaid who failed to stand by the road ready to welcome the couple and light their way would be committing a major social indiscretion.[2] And she would likely be turned away from the feast.

So what exactly is going on in Jesus' story? Half the bridesmaids were prepared, and the other half failed to bring lamp oil with them. *Uh-oh!* We all know how to make excuses. The bridesmaids in the today's parable had their excuses, too. "The bridegroom was late." "We misjudged how much oil the lamps would burn." "The lamps are defective." "The other girls wouldn't share." Or—and we can relate to this—"Oil is at an all-time high so I didn't want to patronize the dealers."[3]

Former late-night-TV host David Letterman once had a Top Ten list of excuses if your boss caught you sleeping at your desk. I won't repeat them all, but for example, Excuse Number 10 was, "They told me at the blood bank this might happen." Excuse Number 7 was "Darn, why did you interrupt me? I'd almost figured out a solution to our biggest problem." Another was "Somebody must have put decaf in the wrong pot." But the number one best thing to say if you got caught with your head down on your desk, was "...in the name of Jesus, Amen."[4]

But back to today's parable. As Jesus tells the story, He is the groom, His bride is the Church, and the oil represents our *spiritual state*. Those of you who heat your homes with an oil furnace or propane know you're in big trouble if you run out of fuel in the middle of winter. Also, our Altar Guild is fully aware of what happens if the candles aren't filled with lamp oil before the Sunday service. They don't light! The don't burn brightly! Jesus is warning us about running low *spiritually.*

If our tanks are empty, then just as the bridesmaids could not borrow oil from the attendants who were fully prepared, we cannot borrow anyone else's *faith.* If you figure it's sufficient just to hang around with good Christian people, or be married to someone who's a devout follower of Christ, the story of the bridesmaids should be a stark reminder that unless you have *your own personal faith in Jesus Christ* and devotion our Lord, you won't be dancing at His heavenly wedding banquet. In fact, you won't even be admitted to the party. Just possibly, the most dangerous lie of Satan is not "There is no God," or "There is no hell," but rather, "There's no hurry. Take all the time in the world to have a meaningful relationship with Christ."

So, what does it mean to be ready and waiting? It means having your spiritual lamp filled with the oil of God's Word, the teachings of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit within you, so that you are prepared for the wedding banquet which is the promised end of all things. It means keeping your lamp lit by following God's ways 24/7—and repenting quickly when you fall short—distancing yourself from evil influences; saying no to temptations; and actively loving your neighbors—<u>and</u> your enemies. Whatever you think is your top priority right now, demote it to second place. Start thinking of deepening your relationship with Jesus Christ and His followers the highest priority in your life. In Colossians 3:17, we read: "<u>whatever</u> you do, in word or deed, do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

The challenge posed by today's Gospel is: Given each of our lives right now, what would the Lord say to us, and how would we feel, if He truly were to return today? Perhaps, like those bridesmaids who waited too long and fell asleep, your faith or spiritual enthusiasm have become dormant. You've thought about renewing your faith, about getting closer to God, or about turning more of your life over to the Holy Spirit, but you've just been too busy, or too tired, or too depressed, or too … whatever.

Humorist and pastor King Duncan writes, "Some folks in Iowa read in the weather forecast column of their local newspaper sometime back 'there is a 90 percent chance of tomorrow.' Personally, I hope the chances are better than that. But who knows? Let's not be foolish. Let's be prepared."[5] And, back in the 18th-century, Father John Wesley was asked what he would do if he knew his Lord would return at that time the next day. He answered: "I would go to bed and go to sleep; wake up in the morning, and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what he had appointed." [6]

Dear friends, Jesus Christ will return. We confess and affirm this every Sunday in the Nicene Creed and in our Eucharistic Liturgy. His coming may or may not be before we leave this earth. But the most important thing is for us to be ready and prepared.

What do those Turnpike signs read? "*Stay Awake. Stay Alive*." If we remain spiritually awake, prepared and eager for Christ's coming, we *will* stay alive—eternally with our Lord, and celebrate at the great marriage feast promised for all who follow Jesus faithfully. It is my profound prayer that none of us—or anyone we love—will be shut out on that day. Rather, that we will all enjoy the blessings our Heavenly Father desires for us.

Let us pray:

Loving God, who longs for Your heavenly Bridegroom to be reunited with His beloved Bride, the Church, keep us ever mindful of the reality that He will return to claim the one who is "His new creation, by water and the Word." Prepare our hearts, souls, minds, and lives to receive Him with a clean conscience and a joyful heart. This we ask in the Name of Jesus Christ Your Son, the Lover of our souls. *Amen.*

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* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, "Ready … or Not?" 9 November 2014, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.
[1] Adapt. Jeremy Myers, "Ready or Not, Here I Come!" February 2014, RedeemingGod.com <https://redeeminggod.com/sermons/matthew/matt_25_1-13> 3 November 2023. Used with permission.
[2] Adapt. Richard A. Todd, "Ten Sleepy Women," November 2026, Sermons.com <https://sermons.com/illustrations> 2 November 2026. Used with permission.
[3] Adapt. Keenan Kelsey, "Oil to Spare," November 2026, Sermons.com <https://sermons.com/illustrations> 2 November 2026. Used with permission.
[4] While frequently attributed in workplace folklore to David Letterman's "Top Ten" segments on *The Late Show*, this specific list of desk-napping excuses lacks an official CBS or Worldwide Pants broadcast citation and functions primarily as a viral internet chain list.
[5] Adapt. King Duncan, "Ninety Percent Chance of Tomorrow," Illustrations ChristianGlobe Network, Inc. <https://sermons.com/illustrations> 2 November 2026. Used with permission.
[6] Traditional saying.