

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.” Benjamin Franklin gave us the proverb, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” And Thomas Edison wrote, “Good fortune happens when opportunity meets with preparation.”

It seems like the wisest, most inspiring leaders of our country were adamant that the key to life is preparation. Living for tomorrow, rather than today. Keeping an eye always to the future, even when the present seems far more important.

I think we know how wise their words are. And yet, preparation also isn't easy. It takes work to be prepared for what life throws at you. It takes commitment and discipline and sometimes even a bit of discomfort to plan ahead. Wise preparation is rarely something we can just do once and then forget about it.

You are wise if you have smoke alarms in your home. But wisdom becomes foolishness if you don't keep fresh batteries in them. You are wise if you have insurance. But wisdom becomes foolishness if you don't pay your premiums. You are wise to have a retirement account. But wisdom becomes foolishness if you don't put any money into it.

Our Gospel lesson today is a parable about preparation. The preparation of those who are wise. And the lack of preparation of those who are fools. And what it takes to be among the wise.

It begins with a situation that was common in Jesus' day, but rather obscure for us. “*The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.*” Now, other than the fact that this story is clearly about a wedding, there's not much about this that's familiar to us. So let me give you some context here.

In Jesus' day, the vast majority of marriages were arranged, usually by the couple's parents. Who, very often, didn't even live in the same town. And, similar to the custom today of the bride's family paying for the wedding, the custom of their day was that the bride's home would host the wedding feast.

So on the day that had been set, the bride would gather her closest unmarried friends to serve basically the same function as bridesmaids. And together they and all the guests would wait for the bridegroom to travel from his parents' home. And when the groom arrived, the wedding feast would begin.

That's what we have here. Ten virgins – ten bridesmaids – keeping watch for the groom to arrive. So that, when he does, they can greet him, usher him inside, and join in the celebration.

There's just one little problem: the groom isn't here yet and it's getting late. That's not really unusual. It was just a reality of that era. They didn't have GPS's to tell them their exact time of arrival. They didn't have cell phones to warn people that they were running late. And there were any number of unavoidable things that could happen that would slow them down.

So these ten women knew this was a possibility all along. We know that they knew this because they all brought lamps with them. Nothing about this surprised them.

And yet, some of them – five of the ten – are very, very foolish. Because they have brought lamps... but not any oil. They knew it might get dark. They knew they might need lamps. They brought the lamps. But not the oil that actually makes the lamps useful.

They have smoke detectors with no batteries. They have an insurance policy that they've never paid into. They have bank accounts with no money in them. They are fools.

Meanwhile, the wise virgins have their lamps and they have their oil. Oil enough to wait the entire night. Oil enough that when the bridegroom arrives, they just have to get up, trim their wicks, and they're ready to go into the wedding feast.

As I said, this is a parable about preparation. The preparation of those who are wise. And the preparation of those who are fools. But now we must ask the question: What are we waiting for? And what is the oil we need to have on hand?

Well, I hope that you already know what we're waiting for. Our service today kind of makes it obvious. Every element of our worship today is about the second coming of Christ. He is the bridegroom, bringing to us the wedding feast of the resurrection.

And it's easy at this point to jump ahead and start asking questions about what sort of preparations we should be taking to be ready for his coming. But let's slow down a second and take a moment to realize something about this parable that should be pretty plain to us, but often isn't.

The virgins brought lamps because they knew the bridegroom could arrive at night, but they were fools to not bring any oil. We know that Christ is returning. We know that we should be waiting for him. We know that the difference between walking into the wedding feast of the resurrection and being left outside banging on the door hinges on us being ready for his return. Which means that this is the single most important priority in any Christian's life.

And it also means that if you are sitting in these pews right now, if you believe that Jesus lived, died, and rose again, if you believe that he is coming soon, but that doesn't influence your life, then you my friend are a fool. I'm sorry, there's simply no other way to say it. You have a house full of smoke detectors without batteries in them. If you know the bridegroom is coming, but you don't bring the oil to keep your lamp lit, then you are a foolish virgin.

Before we can even discuss what it means to be prepared, we have to start with the fundamental truth that no preparation at all definitely makes you a fool. And that is a hard truth that some Christians need to face. If there is nothing in your thoughts, words, and actions that reflects an expectation for Christ's return, then you are not prepared.

But that also helps us understand what our preparation for Christ's return should look like. Because, honestly, it looks like anything that changes our thoughts, words, and actions so that they reflect an ongoing expectation for Christ's return. Anything that directs our eyes to Christ's death and resurrection. Anything that reminds us of his presence in the Church. Most of all, anything that reminds us that he is coming again soon. This is the oil for our lamps.

What are those things? Well, to put it into Lutheran terms: Word and Sacrament. The Word of God preached and taught here on Sunday morning. The Word of God read and studied in your homes. The Word of God spoken from you to your neighbor and from your brothers and sisters in Christ to you.

And the Sacraments. The Baptisms at this font, reminding us of how God has made us his children, and that by baptism we wear those robes made white in the blood of the Lamb that we heard about last week. The Lord's Supper administered from this altar, in which we receive a foretaste of the feast to come in our Lord's Body and Blood. The confession of sins and the absolution that you receive from me as if from Christ himself, declaring to us that our names truly are written in the Book of Life.

These are what make us constantly ready for Christ's return. For the resurrection of all flesh. For the wedding feast of the Lamb in his kingdom that has no end.

And yet, none of these things are actually spelled out in the parable itself. No, we aren't really given an explicit reference point for what the oil is. Rather, we're just told one thing about it: it's readily available.

When the foolish virgins realize that they should have brought oil with them and that the wise virgins can't give them any of theirs, they run to the market to buy some. And they find it. They find it easily. It wasn't expensive. It wasn't difficult to find. It was waiting for them. They could have had it all along.

And so also is the oil for our lamps as well. Preparing for Christ's return isn't a trick. It isn't a test. It isn't an obstacle course. In the grand scheme of life, compared to all of the ways that we should prepare. All of the things we should prepare for. Preparing for Christ's return may be the easiest preparation we will ever take.

Because all the hard work has been done for us. Because Christ himself is not only the bridegroom coming to meet us. He is also the oil for our lamps, poured out on the cross, that we might have the light of the world. It is through him that we have Word and Sacrament. It is through him that we are his body, the Church. It is through him that we have faith that he is coming again.

In the wisdom of the Gospel, he has done all the work. So that we might be prepared for his coming. And be wise unto salvation. Amen.