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Pentecost 26

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Foolish-looking Wisdom”

Text: Matthew 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thess 4:13-18

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

Well, the election is over. The latest “most important election of all time” is now left to the pages of our history books. For a while, no more robo-calls interrupting our dinners. No more campaign commercials to endure. Now the airwaves are filled with pundits on both the right and the left trying to figure out what an Obama presidency will mean. What will he do, when will he do it, and how will he do it? Optimists are promising a new era and utopia for America, while pessimists are sounding the alarm of doom and gloom. Good change, bad change, this change, that change. What will it all mean? None of us knows.

But there is one who does know. The one who is all-knowing. Our Father in heaven, who tells us **“Trust not in rulers; they are but mortal; Earthborn they are and soon decay. . . . Place all your trust in Christ, our Lord.”** (LSB #797 v. 2, paraphrase of Psalm 146) And so Christians are neither dreamily optimistic, nor gloomily pessimistic - but stand on the sure and certain foundation of the Word that never changes. The presidency may change, our country may change, we may change, but our Lord never changes. His promises never change. His forgiveness never changes. And that is our stability in a most unstable world.

And that stability we need now more than ever. Not because of who won or did not win this election, but because the Scriptures tell us not to expect things to get better no matter who does what, when, and how. The sin in this world will continue to wreak its havoc and the evil one will continue to tempt and destroy, deceive and mislead, and his efforts will only intensify as the time until our Lord’s return grows short. . . . And so as we enter into these last three weeks of the church year, that is our focus - that no matter what we do, no matter the progress or programs, just as this year is about to end, so too this world is going to end. Our Lord is going to fulfill His promise to return and take home His bride, the church. And Jesus tells us to be watchful and ready. Do not let optimism or pessimism, prosperity or poverty, wonders or woes, distract you and make you foolish. The Bridegroom is coming, and He wants us to be ready when He does.

So it is important that we know *how* one is watchful and ready and not foolish. The

Scriptures are full of teachings about wisdom and foolishness, but they all boil down to this: to be wise is to have faith in Christ, and foolishness is to put your faith in anyone or anything else. . . . Now, it is important to realize that nobody *wants* to be foolish. Those five foolish virgins Jesus spoke of in His parable did not want to be excluded - and yet they were. Foolishness happens. It happens when our hearts and minds are captivated by the people and things of this world, and we look to them for what we need. It happens when we put our trust in what cannot save, and what will not last. It happens when we run after the cares and pleasures of this life and so our faith in Christ grows cold and goes out. And in the end we find ourselves not only without what we were chasing, but also out in the dark, and empty-handed. That's what happened to the five foolish virgins - they weren't counting on the Bridegroom to delay, and that delay caused their lamps to grow cold and go out.

And the five wise virgins . . . how *foolish* they must have *looked* to the others, lugging their dirty, smelly vessels of oil around with them, especially before a wedding feast! It'd be like a bridesmaid today, all dressed up, hair and make-up perfect, nails done, perfume on - flowers in one hand, and a dirty, smelly can of gas in the other. Stupid, crazy, obsessed, fanatical girls. . . . Yet that is how Christians look to a world that thinks: *we don't need all that religion stuff. We've dressed ourselves up good.* How foolish we look lugging around the baggage of God's Word and truth. How foolish to come to church every Sunday; how foolish to waste our time in prayer; how foolish to call innocent little babies sinners and have them baptized; how foolish to think this Supper we call the Lord's, with its little morsel of bread and sip of wine, can really do anything; how foolish to trust in a God you cannot see; how foolish to confess your sins. There are so many other things you could be doing, you should be doing, they say. So many other *important* and fun things to do. You're a Christian! So relax. Let go of all that baggage. Its not so important. You'll be fine.

And lamps once filled with oil and bright with the light of faith, grow empty and cold and dark. And when the Bridegroom comes, who's foolish now? And that day will be for them as the prophet Amos proclaimed: a day of darkness and not light; a day of dread and not joy.

But it need not be. For while the unbelieving world thinks Christians are like foolish Linuses in the pumpkin patch, waiting for our Great Pumpkin to come (thanks Pastor Cwirla for the illustration!), that is not what Christians are about at all. For, in fact, we are not standing around, looking into the heavens, waiting for an **absent** Bridegroom to finally come - we are waiting for the **appearing** of our **hidden** Bridegroom who was really here with us all along. The Bridegroom who promised us, ***"I am with you always"*** (Mt 28:20). The Bridegroom who came and embraced us on the cross, laying down His life for us, and becoming one flesh with us, and we

with Him. This Bridegroom, our Saviour Jesus Christ, has not now left us on our own, to (hopefully) make it to the wedding feast through a hostile and foolish world, but is with us still. To keep our lamps filled with the oil of faith, that when He *appears*, we will be ready.

Which means we watch for the One who is coming by watching the One who has come. By looking for the Bridegroom not in the clouds, but in the manger and on the cross. And by fixing our eyes on Jesus where He is present - *though hidden* - for us now: in the preaching of His Word, in the proclaiming of His forgiveness, in the washing of His Baptism, and in the eating of his Supper. And when the Bridegroom *appears* and is hidden no longer, we will see Him and be ready, for we have been watching Him - by faith - all along. Watching not in a pumpkin patch of our own choosing, hoping that we have been sincere enough - but watching in the places of His choosing, and knowing that His presence is certain and His promises are true. As certain and true as the empty tomb.

That is what the apostle Paul pointed the people of Thessalonica to when they were confused and uncertain. Fact number one, he says, is this: ***that Jesus died and rose again.*** That makes all the difference in the world. And He didn't do that for Himself, you know - He did it for you. That your death would be followed by a resurrection to life again, through Jesus. Through His forgiveness. That what once separated us from God separate us no more. That we be with Him - now in His hiddenness, and then when He appears. When He comes to take home - once and for all - His Bride, to the feast of heaven that has no end.

And so wise (but foolish-*looking*) virgins repent. We remember our baptisms and are washed clean of our sins. We hear an ancient but ever new Word. We eat the body and drink the blood of the One who became one with us. And through these means, we see and yet we do not see. We wait and yet receive what we are waiting for. Until that wonderful day when our waiting will end and our eyes will see. And we will be ready.

And so this parable today helps us to keep things in focus, and realize that the church is - once again - quite different than the world. For most marriages in this life begin with a honeymoon, which lasts only a week or two, and then comes the everyday: the struggle, the sin, the forgiveness. And finally, the day when "till death parts us" comes true. . . . But imagine a marriage where the honeymoon comes at the end, and lasts forever. *That's the way of it with Jesus.* For now, as we wait and live in this life, it's not easy. The siren song of sin is strong and powerful. Doubts and fears cause confusion and anxiety. We often struggle. But it will not always be so. Our Bridegroom is coming to take us to the wedding feast. To the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. To the marriage feast where death can *never* part us, and the honeymoon

never ends.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do not let the wisdom of the world make you foolish, but let the foolishness of Christ make you wise. That when He appears, you be ready. Ready to be with Him who was with you all along.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.