

# Apostles Anglican Church

12 November 2023

Fr. Rob Goebel

Main Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Supporting Text: John 15:9-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Title: Ready, Set, Wait

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Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, you gave your Apostles grace truly to believe and to preach your word: Grant that we might love what they believed and preach what they taught through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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When I was very young, my dad left the world of finance to become a pastor. In the time between leaving his business and receiving a call to pastor a church, he was an itinerant Evangelist preaching and teaching about the end times. Dad had all kinds of books and study guides on the end of days. But, I remember one book in particular that had a big impact on my young mind, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Now, I don't want to give anything away, but there was no rapture in 1988. The author of that book, Edgar Whisenant, was unphased, and the next year, he published *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*, in which he predicted Christ would return in 1989—still, no rapture or return of Jesus in the second coming. Whisenant would go on to write two more books predicting that Christ would return, one in 1993 and another in 1994.

But, in the year 2023, armed with the knowledge that the second coming hasn't yet happened, we might find Edgar Whisenant's books a little silly and maybe even a little foolish. But one thing I have to give Mr. Whisenant is that he was ready. He was on the lookout for Christ's second coming.

While we might like to know the year, date, and time of Christ's second coming, that luxury isn't afforded to us. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew chapter 25 that we "... know neither the day nor the hour ... he will return to earth.

Although we don't know the day or the hour he will return, we still need to be prepared. We can't wait until it's too late.

When I was in my early twenties, I had an old Volkswagen Jetta. I paid next to nothing for it, and I overpaid. That car had so many leaks and other problems that I had to keep a bunch of tools and supplies in the trunk for the times when it would break down. Once, I pulled up a little too far in a parking spot, and my bumper went over the parking block. When I backed out, the parking block ripped my entire bumper clean off the car.

But ... I was prepared. I popped the trunk and got bailing wire, duct tape, and zip ties. I had that bumper back on in no time.

We must be prepared. We prepare for things as small as a dinner party, a power outage, or an unexpected repair to our homes or our vehicles. Some prepare for bigger emergencies like natural disasters, economic downturns, and international crises, to name a few.

But when it comes to preparing for the coming of Christ, how do we prepare?

Well, let's take a look at today's passage from Matthew. Jesus tells his disciples a parable about five wise and five foolish bridesmaids.

This parable is the first of two stories Jesus tells his disciples about properly preparing for the master's return.

In the verses directly after the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus tells his disciples The Parable of the Talents. These parables are about waiting and preparing for the return of the master or the bridegroom.

I won't get into the Parable of the Talents because that's next week's reading. But I want us to note these passage's placement in the weeks leading up to Advent. This is no coincidence.

The Church is calling us through the lectionary to prepare and consider what it means for us to be ready to enter into a season of waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ.

Let's take some time to consider the ways Christ may come to us and how we should prepare and wait for his return.

One of the ways we can all be assured Christ will come to us is at our inevitable demise.

My hope for all of us is that when we pass from this life to the next, we'll find ourselves face-to-face with Jesus. Now, if you're here today and you're unsure if you will find yourself with Christ at your death or if you're **afraid** you might find yourself face-to-face with Christ when you die . . . take heart and fear not because not only is God near you but He is also good, and he is especially fond of you. He receives all who come to him with open arms.

All of us (unless the Lord returns soon) will one day meet our end. But is securing our place in the paradise of God all we need to do to prepare for our eventual deaths?

It's very important to be right with God, and the New Jerusalem is going to be a whole lot better than the alternative, but here's the thing:

God is Love, but God's love is a burning fire. God is not judgment today and loving tomorrow. He is both judgment and Love. His judgment is love. When we come face-to-face with the unveiled love of God, His love will burn away from us all that is sinful, broken, and wrong within us. Many of us, myself included, often think the broken parts of us are actually not broken. We often believe that what is sinful in us is actually good. In fact, we can begin to believe these things are part of us; they are what make us who we are.

But God loves us too much to let us continue in this falsehood. And so his love judges all that is sinful, broken, and wrong in us. When we come to Christ, he meets us where we are, like a mother holding her precious child just after she's given birth. But like that mother, he expects that growth and maturity will come again and again as we continue our Christian journey.

The burning fire of God's love destroys all that is not us because he loves us. It purifies us like gold refined in the fire.

Today's collect says it best. It says in part:

*O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life: Grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure.*

So, the preparation Christ calls us to as we look to meeting him at the end of our lives is to submit to the burning fire of his love now, on this side of glory.

It's painful, but it's good.

I remember the cold winters growing up in northeastern Ohio. We would spend hours out in the cold, playing in the snow, and our hands would get so cold they would become numb. And my brother and I would come in from the cold, and we would take our gloves off and warm our hands over the register. While that would eventually feel good, at first, it felt like our hands were being burnt because they were so cold and the heat was so warm. But coming in and warming up kept us from getting frostbite.

But how do we warm ourselves at the burning fire of God's love?

Well, I'm glad you asked!

For that answer, we turn to the next way Christ comes to us. He comes to us in our daily lives. He meets us as we come to church and gather as his body. He comes in the love shared between our brothers and sisters in the faith. He meets us in prayer and Bible study. He reveals himself in the beauty of the land.

He shows himself to us in the faces of the poor and the needy, in the stranger, and in our neighbors. He joins us in our difficulties, problems, and failures.

He wants to share fellowship with us, to support and care for us. In these times of gathering and service to others and in times of difficulties, as he is close to us, we become slightly more warmed by the fire of his love and as this happens time and time again we become set on fire with his love.

The prayer of thanksgiving at the back of the prayer book wraps this all up for us. It says:

*We thank you [Oh God] for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love. We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side. We thank you for setting us at tasks that demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments that satisfy and delight us. We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.*

Take the opportunity next time you're talking with your neighbor or buying groceries at the store to see if you can find Christ with you, sharing his love with you. Or maybe he's walking with you in a difficult situation. These are all opportunities to experience the love of Christ and to prepare yourself for his next coming. His coming in glory.

Christ's second coming, the last of his advents we will look at today, can be frightening for some, but it need not be if we have prepared ourselves for his coming at our deaths and in our daily lives.

Those who have let go of their own solutions for salvation and have turned to Christ as the only solution need not be afraid of his return. Jesus says in John chapter 15:

*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.<sup>1</sup>*

We must continue in the work of abiding in Christ and keeping his commandments until he comes again.

We abide in him by humbling ourselves and submitting to the work he is doing in us.

We must make amends with those we have harmed and forgive those who have harmed us.

We pray for God to show us the things he wants for us and the blind spots we hide from the healing power of his burning love.

We do all this so that when he comes, we will know him, and he will know us. And we will be ready to see him face to face.

Now comes the hard part: after we have done all this preparation, we must endure one of the most challenging and formative things Christ calls us to; we must wait.

Consider the ten bridesmaids, half of them didn't think they'd have to wait long, and they didn't prepare properly. But the other five prepared for the groom's return to be delayed and then they waited.

Waiting is challenging for us because we live in a world of instant gratification. The words of a popular song sum up our society's mantra: "*I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it.*"<sup>2</sup>

And I know that longing for Christ's return, for all the wrongs to be righted, and to gather in the New Jerusalem with all of our faithfully departed loved ones.

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:9-10

<sup>2</sup> <https://genius.com/Ariana-grande-7-rings-lyrics>

But good things come to those who wait.

When we wait on the Lord, we have to submit to his control. We have to surrender our own timing and when we think things should happen. We have to accept that we are not in control. Christian Author Ashley Hales writes:

*Waiting reminds us that although we have agency, we are not ultimately in control. For those of us who find value in achieving, working hard, and crossing off tasks on our to-do lists, waiting can push us into a tailspin as it unhooks the lynchpin between who we are and what we do. When forced to wait, we must reckon with the deep questions of identity. Who am I when I am not productive? What if waiting weren't something to get past and hurdle over—a blip on our race to the top? What if waiting is an invitation to see ourselves as children again, dependent on a good Father?<sup>3</sup>*

Waiting then becomes a preparation of its own. Whispering to us, “This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.” Knowing who is really in control and trusting in his goodness and power, we can find ourselves ready to face whatever might come.

All of this preparation waiting, and submission to Christ is difficult. And I know I don't want to think about preparing for my eventual demise, and I would guess it's not your favorite subject either but consider the prize at the end.

Our reading from first Thessalonians chapter four paints a beautiful picture of the prize we endure for:

*... We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this, we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-waiting/>

*dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.*

And so we prepare for Christ's return and we wait, being encouraged and encouraging others with the hope of that day when we will see our Lord face-to-face.

Amen.