

Here in North Dakota, I think we understand what it means to be ready, what it means to be prepared for something that we may not be able to foresee or even to predict. Especially with winter approaching, right? This is a time when we have to be ready, when we have to be ready for whatever might happen, just in case we get stranded. Because we understand in a case like that that being prepared and being unprepared might very well mean the difference between life and death. After all, it's why we carry tools within our vehicles, right? It's why you have a tire iron with you, so that if your tire goes flat, you can change it on the road. It's why you have jumper cables, in case the battery dies or someone else's battery dies, you're able to charge it up and get going again. It's why we keep the gas tank full in the winter, just in case you do get stranded, so you can keep the vehicle going and you'll stay warm when every moment counts. It's even why we stockpile food, so you don't have to go to the store all the time, especially when that blizzard comes. We know what it means to be ready, and we understand the importance of being ready.

But let me ask you this, Christians. Is being ready something that you only do once in the past? Or is being ready something that you do continually, so that you will always be prepared? Let me ask it this way, just so I'm clear. Is having a tool and owning it all you need to do to be ready for something? Or do you also have to have it with you in the event that something happens? After all, you could own 100 tire irons, but they don't do you any good if they're all hanging in the garage when you need to change the tire. You could own every jumper cable in the world, but it's not going to do you a whole lot of good when they're all off somewhere else and you're here trying to get the car going. And it doesn't matter if you filled up the gas tank last week. If the tank is empty now, and it's miles to the next town, it's not going to do you any good. Being prepared is not just about having these things or having done them sometime before. Being prepared is always having them with you, so that you are ready for whatever may come.

Christians, this is no different when it comes to the things of God. Being ready for the return of Jesus Christ is not about having been ready once upon a time. Being ready for the return of Jesus is about being continuously ready, continuously paying attention, so that when he comes, we will not be caught by surprise. That's what Jesus is teaching us today in our Gospel lesson.

Because here in Matthew chapter 25, Jesus is telling us a story. He says, ten virgins go out to meet the bridegroom. What's happening here is that, in those days, one of their wedding customs was that the virgins, sort of like what we have as bridesmaids, would all go out and they would meet the bridegroom as he was coming into town. And then they would lead him in a procession to the house of the bride. It was just part of their customs. It was part of how they got married. But in this particular story, we are told, the bridegroom is late in coming. Nobody seems to know where he is. All they know is that he's not here. And so these virgins, then, are waiting for him. They're trying to go out and to be ready in the event that he finally shows up. But it turns out it's been a very, very long time. Day has turned into night, and so they need to take lamps with them in order to be ready for when the bridegroom finally comes.

Now, I want you to notice something here right away, Christians. At this moment in the beginning of the story, all of these virgins are ready. They are all prepared. If the bridegroom had come at that moment, they all would've gone out to him, they all would have gone with him, and they all would have entered into the wedding feast. At this moment in the story, they are all

prepared for the bridegroom's arrival. But, we are told, five of them are wise, and five of them are foolish. Well, what makes them wise and what makes them foolish? The wise understood that this waiting might actually go on longer. They needed to be ready for the possibility that the bridegroom might not even come until tomorrow morning. So they took along with them extra oil so that they can keep their lamps burning. So in the event that it did take all the way until next morning, they would still be ready to carry out their duties, to bring the bridegroom to the house of the bride. That's what made them wise. But the foolish virgins, on the other hand, thought that they were already prepared. They had done everything that they needed to do. There was nothing left to get ready for. We have a lamp with us, and he's gonna be here soon anyway, so we don't need to bring along this extra oil. We don't need to do these other things. That would just be overkill. All we need is what we already have, so we will go and we will wait, and he will be here soon anyway. But that's what made them foolish. They didn't take into account that there would be a possibility of the bridegroom being even later he was. And he did end up being quite late. So late, in fact, that we're told that all ten of them ended up getting drowsy and falling asleep.

Then at midnight a cry goes out. The bridegroom's here! He's almost all the way to the village. Get up! Go out and meet him. He will soon be here. And so they all get up. They're all excited. They're starting to trim up their lamps. They're starting to get ready for him, getting everything lit up again, so that they'll be ready for the bridegroom when he finally gets there. But now the foolishness of the foolish virgins shows itself. They haven't prepared for this possibility. And try as hard as they might, trying to light their lamps again, they can't get them to stay lit, because they don't have any extra oil. There's nothing for that flame to live on. And so they turn to the wise virgins and they say, "Can you help us out? Give us some of your oil. That way we can all go together and have our lamps lit and meet the bridegroom as he comes into town. We'll go as a group, and we'll help each other out." But the wise are wise enough to see that that's not going to work either. Because they only really brought enough for themselves. If they were to try to light both lamps, those of their own and those of the foolish virgins, then nobody's lamp would be lit. They wouldn't have enough to keep anything going. And so they say, "No, take the time. Go back into town. Get some oil for yourself. Be quick about it and come back. And then we can all go together to meet the bridegroom as he comes into town." But while they're doing that, the bridegroom comes. And those who were wise, who were prepared for him, they go in with him to the wedding feast. And the door is shut behind them. So that when the foolish virgins finally come, and they say, "Lord, Lord, open to us," the only reply that they get is "I do not know you." It was too late. The opportunity had passed them by.

Christians, are you ready for the return of Christ? Now I think everyone who at least claims to be a Christian is going to say yes to that question. They're going to say, "Sure, I'm ready. I'm ready for Jesus. I believe in him and all that. I will not be caught by surprise when he finally comes." But is being ready for Jesus a matter of what I have done in the past, once upon a time? Or is being ready for Jesus a matter of being ready right now? Because let me ask you this way. Someone might come up to you and say, "Well I can prove to you that I am ready for Jesus. After all, I was baptized. I know the date. I can tell you the church, tell you the pastor. And here's the certificate, signed, sealed, delivered from the church. This proves that I was baptized." They would even say, "And I was confirmed in the same church. Signed, sealed, delivered certificate from the church proves that this all happened here on this date, in this place. I can prove it to

you." They might even say to you, "I'm a member of a church somewhere. My name is on the rolls. And I go as often as I can and I do what I'm able to, but"--pay attention to that but--"but I'm just so busy. My work gets in the way all the time. Seems like I never am at an end of things to do. When I get around to Sunday, well, that's the only day I really get off and I'm tired and I want to take it easy. And I can get to all of these things later! I'll get to it. It's just I don't have any time right now." But what does that sound like to you? Does that sound like the wise virgins or the foolish?

Or maybe they would say, "Well, these things just don't seem all that important to me. I had all those things in the past, all those things to prove I'm a member somewhere. I just don't really feel the need to do all of these things that God would have me do. I don't really feel a need to do God's things, to go to church, to be in the Word, any of that stuff. I'll get to it some other time." But does that sound like the wise virgins or the foolish?

Because, Christians, being a Christian is not about what we have done once upon a time. It's not about all of those things that have happened in the past. Faith does not live on memory. Faith lives on what God gives to it right now. And when we are not in those things, when we are not receiving the gifts of God, it's like we are running out of the oil which our faith needs to survive. And so if we're always putting these things off, always saying we're too busy, we're always saying that we'll do it some other time, I think pretty soon we're going to find ourselves caught completely by surprise when the Lord returns in glory. To be in the things of God, Christians, is what God calls for us to do. He wants us to receive the things that he gives to us today. When we are in the Word of God, hearing his promises and hearing that life-giving Word for ourselves every single day and every single week, then we are being built up in faith so that we are not caught by surprise. And when we receive the gifts of God which he gives to us in our Baptisms, which he gives to us in the Lord's Supper, that faith is still being strengthened. So that in all of this, that flame will burn all the brighter, because faith lives on what God gives to it each and every day. And so if we want to be in the things of God and to not be caught by surprise when he returns, let us to listen to him. Listen to what he has to say. Listen to every word that comes from his mouth. Because faith is not about what God said once upon a time. Faith is about what God says to you today.

So Christians wake up! Pay attention! Your bridegroom will soon be here. And if we want to be ready for him, let us go to where he has promised to be. Because then he will strengthen us in that faith and prepare us for his coming, because he is coming soon. Listen to him, Christians. Listen to him, and you will be ready for when Jesus returns in glory.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.