

Enduring Faith

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Matthew 25:13

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (*Matthew 25:13*) Of all the words in our three readings this weekend, these words are the ones that stood out the most to me. Now I have to confess that the reason these words initially jumped out to me wasn't exactly for the reason that Jesus spoke them. As many of you know, Madeline is expecting and this month is supposed to be her delivery month. However, the truth is, that at this point, the baby could come at any moment and so no truer words could be spoken, **“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”** (*Matthew 25:13*)

As this reality has been sinking in for my family, there were two things that struck me about what we were doing to stay prepared. First, we've maintained and even increased our connection to those professionals who are able to help and provide care as the day of delivery approaches. Our doctor appointments had been regular but now have increased in frequency as the moment draws near. There are even moments where we've needed to call into the doctor's office or look at their resources online to get better guidance about questions that have come up during this pregnancy.

The second thing that stuck with me about being prepared is remembering something we were told during our first pregnancy with Everett. The medical team that cared for us during that first pregnancy reminded us that God had built Madeline to do this delivery. The same is true this time around. God built Madeline for this delivery as well. While we know that this doesn't guarantee the perfect, smooth delivery, there is comfort in remembering that we rest on God's work and design and not merely our own devices. As we rest on His work, we also know that He remains involved to see us through this moment of delivery whatever might come.

Both the care and skill of the medical professionals God has given to help us in this moment and the reliance upon God's work and design have served to fuel an enduring spirit and attitude as we wait. Endurance is so critical, especially as the moment of delivery approaches. Physically, mentally, emotionally enduring until the time arrives is a big part of staying prepared. While our endurance has certainly been tested in these past months, by God's grace we continue day by day awaiting delivery day.

On behalf of my family, I want to thank you all for your care, concern and prayers especially during this pregnancy. We're not the only family at Emmanuel going through something like this at this time and I'm thankful for the ways this Emmanuel family tries to care for each family preparing for a new little one. While I'm sure that my description of my family's experience may not exactly match each expectant families' experience, I share our experience as a helpful lens into our Gospel reading for this weekend.

In the church year, the month of November is the last month. As the last month of the church year, it often becomes more intentionally focused on Jesus' second coming. We also use language like, the 'Day of the Lord' or the 'End Times' or even 'Judgement Day' to describe this coming moment. To be clear, the topic of Jesus' second coming is nothing new to our worship life. Jesus' return is something we confess weekly as we speak the creeds. However, during this time in the church year, the Scripture readings, songs and prayers keep this reality more prominently in front of us. This weekend's Gospel reading certainly places Jesus' return in front of us.

The parable Jesus tells at the beginning of Matthew 25 takes place during the final days before Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. This timing is significant. The events of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension bring this world into the end times. As Lutheran Christians, we view these major moments of Jesus' earthly ministry as the clear starting line of the end times. This is important for us to recognize. In this current day and age, we aren't merely approaching the end times neither are the end times suddenly springing upon us because of certain events we notice in the world around us. We've been in the end times for a long time now and remembering this perspective makes Jesus' parable all the more relevant to us this weekend.

Using a wedding feast image, Jesus describes His eventual return as the bridegroom celebrating His marriage to His bride, the Church. Throughout the Bible, this end time picture has been painted of Christ and His bride, the Church and their marriage feast. In this specific parable, Jesus' message highlights the importance of staying prepared, the importance of enduring until He returns in order to be ready to join in the celebration.

The ten virgins, five foolish and five wise as described by Jesus, represent for us believers who know the bridegroom Jesus and have been invited to join in the wedding celebration. As these virgins waited for the celebration parade to come, their wait increased due to a delay and they all grew sleepy. Then at an unexpected time the bridegroom arrived and the call went out and woke these virgins. They quickly prepared their lamps to meet the celebration, but due to the delay, the five foolish virgins were unprepared. And in their attempts to refuel, they missed the celebration.

There's a sobering reality for us in this parable that we need to be prepared even if Jesus' return is delayed. Jesus' second coming isn't something we can pinpoint. As He concludes this parable, we don't know the day or the hour of His return and yet this lack of knowledge doesn't excuse us from being unprepared. Staying prepared requires endurance, more specifically an enduring faith. But the problem is that during our wait, we can grow unprepared and then only realize too late that our enduring faith has run out of fuel.

Among all the details in this parable, this is the most critical. What is the oil that fuels the lamps? Or perhaps we might best apply it this way, what fuels our faith so that it endures? What do we need to be ready for Jesus' return? We need Jesus and everything He provides so that our faith endures. Jesus and His Words and Works alone are what fuel our faith. It's not our actions or another believer's actions that fuel our faith, rather it's Jesus' actions that are the source of enduring faith and He is the one who provides the fuel our faith needs.

We need the Bible, Jesus' Words, that assure us of what He has done for us. We need His gift of Baptism, that seals us with His name, marks us as part of His family and is our ongoing reminder that our value and worth are in Him. We need His gift of Communion, that sustains and strengthens our faith preparing us for the marriage feast to come that has no end. We need the community of His Church, where His forgiveness is faithfully proclaimed and repentant sinners join together to receive His forgiveness. We need Christian friends, teachers, pastors, counselors, etc. to encourage us to stay connected to where Jesus provides the fuel that our faith needs to endure. And my dear friends in Christ, these things that we need to stay prepared and endure, Jesus provides.

Just like this month of November has led my family to increase our connection to those who can help us endure until delivery day, may this month of November and the church's focus on Jesus' return encourage us not to grow weary in being connected to Christ and His gifts. We know neither the hour or day of His return, but because of Jesus, His Words and His Works, we can be certain that we are prepared and will endure. Our confidence rests in Him and His promises and He will not let us down for He is faithful to His promises.

So, as we continue to endure together, and even as our endurance is tested, let us not grow weary of confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness so that no unrepentant sin can dim and extinguish our faith. Let us not grow weary of remembering our own baptismal identity in Jesus. Let us not grow weary of feeding our souls with Jesus' Words and His Body and Blood. Let us not grow weary of encouraging each other to love our neighbor and faithfully respond to the love that Jesus continues to give us. Let us not grow weary of using every gift our Lord provides us so that we may endure until His return. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan