

**Faithful Living While We Wait**  
**Part One: The Absent Bridegroom and the Ten Waiting Attendants**  
**Matthew 25.1-13**

**February 22**

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**Part One: The Series: Matthew 24.42-51**

On Wednesday, Covenant joined other churches around the world in observing the start of Lent.

Historically Lent, the period of time that runs from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, is a time of self-examination for followers of Jesus, allowing God to probe to explore the strength and depth of their faith and faithfulness.

In that spirit, this morning we begin a new series that focuses on Jesus' call on our lives while we await his return. What is our *responsibility* as we wait?

The first believers were thrown for a loop when they watched Jesus ascend to heaven forty days after his triumphant resurrection.

They thought they had redemptive history figured out. Here's the way we thought it would go.

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Jesus comes  
and establishes  
his Kingdom

This is what they expected, the paradigm – as best they could tell – that was laid out by the Old Testament: the promised Messiah will come and establish his kingdom, the lion will lie down with the lamb, and righteousness and justice will find their full expression, and that will be that. One seamless unfolding.

How surprised they were when, just before he died, Jesus began to prepare his followers for it to look very differently. Like this.

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 Jesus comes  
 and initiates  
 his Kingdom

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 Jesus returns  
 and consummates  
 his Kingdom

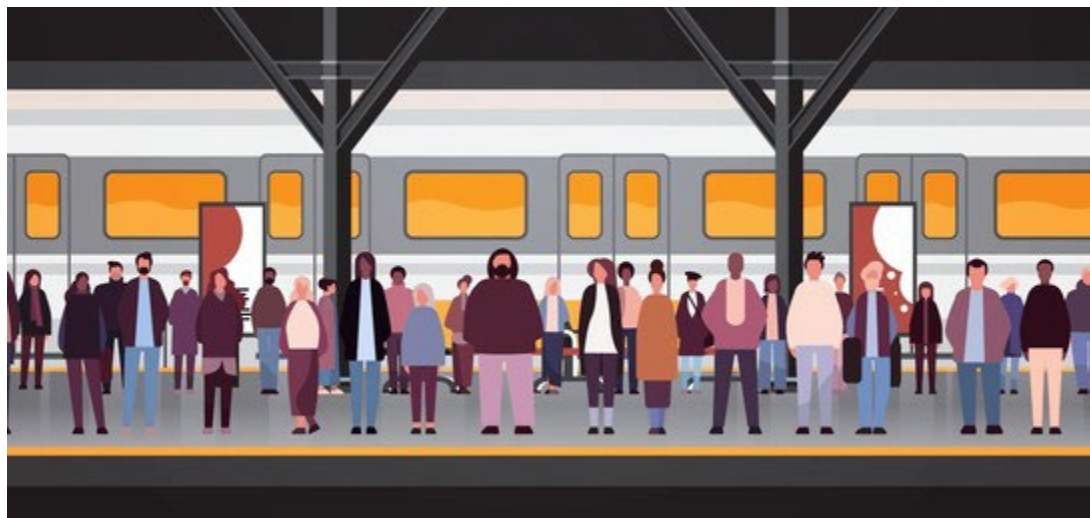
Jesus comes, and he initiates his kingdom, but then he dies and rises and ascends to heaven, and someday – someday – he'll be back to finish what he started.

So his followers waited for his return. A few years go by, and no Jesus. Then a few generations. Still no Jesus. And here we are twenty centuries later, and he still hasn't returned.

So here's the question we are compelled to ask: what do we do while we wait?

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Our Christian life is like standing on a train platform waiting for him to come back.



Off he went, and we thought he would be right back on the next train. So here we are, still hanging out on the platform. Now what?

Knowing that this long delay was coming, and anticipating the challenge these days would prove to be for his followers, Jesus taught several parables about the unique challenges faced by his followers as they, as we, seek faithfully to love, honor, and serve him in the in-between.

As you may be aware, a parable is a unique teaching tool that Jesus used often – tales from everyday life that Jesus used to teach spiritual lessons. While there are many related lessons you might derive from them, each parable is intended to communicate just one primary idea.

Most of the parables about this time in-between his first visit to earth and his second and final one are found near the end of Matthew's gospel.

These in-between parables all follow roughly the same pattern:

The story of an absent \_\_\_\_\_ and his faithful/unfaithful \_\_\_\_\_

A king, or a bridegroom, or a homeowner, or a shepherd, goes away, and his subjects, his household manager, his sheep, his attendants respond to his absence in one of two ways: they are faithful to their responsibility or they are not.

The question Jesus raises through these parables is: what are our **responsibilities** during this in-between time?

As we will discover in these parables, there are primarily two – which seem at first to be contradictory

They call us – especially the parable we'll be looking at in just a bit, to

- **Patient waiting related to our future hope. *The King is coming.***

But they also call us – almost all the rest of them – to:

- **Urgent action related to our present opportunity. *The door is closing.***

The king is coming. With each passing day we are closer to the fulfillment of our hope.

At the same time, the door is closing. The end is drawing near. And we have a grave responsibility to the people God has placed around us in these waning hours.

As we'll see, we don't pick one or the other. these two ways of seeing have to be held in tension.

Just as someone can be so heavenly minded they are no earthly good,  
so someone can be so earthly minded they have no saintlihood

Jesus calls us have eyes for both heaven and earth, to live a life of vigilant faith and vigilant faithfulness both.

With that quick overview, let's first read the overview parable with which Jesus begins this teaching. We find it in Matthew 24.42-44. Here's how it goes.

Matthew 24.42-51

Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the

thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, "My master is staying away a long time," and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In this introductory parable we see all the key themes that will become familiar through the rest of them:

- A person in charge goes away, entrusting responsibility to someone he leaves in charge.
- Some are faithful to that responsibility, some are not.
- Then we see the great pleasure of the one in charge when he returns and finds faithfulness, and his great displeasure when he finds irresponsibility instead.
- The story ends with a charge to remain vigilant in his absence.

In this first overview story, he calls those unfaithful servants "hypocrites."

In his mind that is not a light charge. He tells them, in other words, that they pretend to be what their words and actions expose that they are not. They claim to be his followers but he doesn't see them in the same way. In the Luke 12 parallel of this parable the word "hypocrite" is replaced with the word "unbeliever." That's challenging.

Last Sunday when we were driving back from Charlotte we stopped at a Starbucks near Knoxville. I asked J, the woman behind the counter, how her day was going.

"Busy! The Sunday rush, and then a bunch of people unexpectedly showed up this afternoon. It has just now finally let up."

I placed my order and then said, "Can I ask you a question? I probably don't look like it because I'm on vacation but I'm a pastor. And as I've talked with folks in the food service industry I've heard that the Sunday crowd has a pretty negative reputation. How would you describe your experience of church goers?"

She opened her eyes wide and puffed out her cheeks and then looked at me, like, I'm not sure you're going to want to hear what I'm about to say!

I said, "Really, I'd love to know. I want you to be honest. It won't offend me at all."

She paused and then said, "Okay . . ." She shook her head. "They are so testy, impatient, pushy, and critical."

"I'm so sorry to hear that." I said. "That just seems so contradictory to the faith they profess, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, they just seem so . . . hypocritical."

In our evangelical subculture we have defined what it means to be a Christian in increasingly simplified ways since the 1950s. Often we say it comes down simply to saying that we accept the forgiveness of Jesus and believe he will take us to heaven.

But in these parables Jesus pushes back on that simple definition. To believe in Jesus is to declare him King and Lord, giving him our full allegiance, and seeking in every way to align our wills with his.

That's what makes these parables such probing material for a Lent series. They press us to consider carefully how much our lives really reflect our allegiance to him as we await his return. Do they reflect his heart and his priorities?

## **Part Two: The Message: Matthew 25.1-11**

So with that parable as an introduction to the idea that Jesus will take longer to return than we think he will, and that we have a responsibility to him in the meanwhile, Jesus then tells three more parables in a row in which he elaborates on our responsibilities while we wait.

The first of those, found in Matthew 25.2-11, is our focus for the rest of the morning.

And in this parable in particular, as we'll see, the main focus is on the first of those two themes we talked about: *patiently waiting for our King, confident that he is coming.*

To make sense of this parable it will be helpful for you to know a little bit about weddings in the first century.

First, there was a betrothal between the bride and the groom, which took place at the bride's home. From that point on, the bride and groom were considered as good as married, even though they did not live or sleep together.

Next came a waiting period which was at least one year and was often several years. During that time the bride was preparing herself, creating her wardrobe, gathering the

things she needed for her household, and sometimes, because betrothals could come at such a young age, simply growing up and becoming more mature.

Meanwhile, the groom returned to his father's house, where he built a new addition onto the family house that would serve as his home with his bride.

At the end of that waiting period, several unmarried friends of the bride would join her in her father's home and help her make her final preparations, dressing her, fixing her hair, anointing her with perfume, as well as gathering her wardrobe and possessions, and helping her pack.

Then, finally, word would come that the groom was on his way! The tradition was for the groom with his best man and other friends to make a procession after sunset to the bride's home. There they would put the bride in a litter or in a carriage, and, together with all of her attendants, they would process with singing and dancing to the groom's father's house.

Then would begin the week-long wedding celebration – the wedding ceremony itself first, followed by sumptuous feasts, games, music, dancing, singing, celebrating.

Because of their utter extravagance, for the Jewish people, weddings became the primary metaphor for the time when the Messiah, the divine King, would come and gather in all those who were his, to enjoy an unending celebration for eternity.

We see the image, for example in Isaiah 25.6-8. It's also one that Jesus used often, including in the passage we're looking at now.

So, with that background, let's look at the passage.

Matthew 25.1

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins – those unmarried friends – who took their oil lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Jesus begins: This is what the kingdom of heaven will be like. Another way to put that is: this is what it will be like for those who call me King.

It will be like ten unmarried friends of the bride, helping her get ready, who get word that the groom is finally on his way.

They scoop up their oil lamps and run outside. Larger lamps might burn for as much as three hours, or maybe four. But the reservoir was still so small that they needed to be refilled once or twice to make it through the night.

Matthew 25.2-4

Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.

Jesus doesn't just use the words wise and foolish randomly. Going all the way back to the Book of Proverbs, in the Old Testament, these words have a deeper meaning than simply thinking clearly or reasoning poorly.

These two words are a biblical shorthand: a wise person is someone who includes God in the picture, and honors him, and the foolish one is the one who leaves God out of the picture, and dishonors him.

The wise ones gave the king the prerogative to return when he sees fit, and anticipate the possibility that they might need to wait, so they bring extra oil, while the unwise ones assume that this would all unfold on their schedule, in their timing, and they just bring the small amount of oil that their lamps already held. Surely the groom wouldn't keep them waiting, wouldn't keep them from other things.

Why were those lamps so important?

For three reasons, I think.

- For the groom – they wanted to give him a warm and honoring welcome
- For themselves – they didn't want to miss him as he passed by.
- And also for the bride – they wanted to accompany her safely through the dark streets to the wedding celebration and the long-awaited union with the groom

Matthew 25.5-7

The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.

The night wore on and on – so long that they nodded off. It was not uncommon for the groom to come later than hoped.

But then they heard people shouting that he was finally nearing. They roused from their sleep and trimmed their lamps, pinching off the burnt and frayed edges of the wick so it would burn as brightly and as free of smoke as was possible – the better not to miss him, the better to welcome and honor him, the better to accompany the bride to him.

Matthew 25.8-13

The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out." "No," they replied, "there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves."

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

Later the others also came. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door for us!" But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you." Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

The unprepared, unwatchful, attendants say to the groom, "Lord, Lord!"

But a Lord is someone to whom you have turned over your life. Someone to whom you have given your full allegiance. A Lord is someone you put first, think of first, plan for first.

He says to them, I don't know you. Literally, I don't see you. When I look for my followers, I don't see you among them. Your lives don't declare me Lord – only your words do.

Then Jesus concludes his parable: "Therefore, keep watch."

Spiritually, according to Jesus, this time between his first coming and his second coming is the nighttime (Matthew 24.42, John 9.4). This world walks in spiritual darkness (John 8.12, 11.9-10), shrouded in the pall of night.

Jesus is the Light of the World and he brings the dawn with him wherever he goes; he is the promised Sun of Righteousness who rises with healing in his wings (Malachi 4.2).

This long dark night between his first coming and his second coming requires vigilance.

He calls us, during this long night, in verse 11, to "keep watch." Literally it says, "Stay awake." Remain vigilant. Remain alert and attentive.

To what specifically? Above all else, to him. Keep looking for the bridegroom, in fulfillment of his promise to walk down the street in the dead of night and gather up his bride into the light of day.

And we are called to look with eagerness down the road along which the king will one day return.

Someone recently asked me the very thoughtful question – if Jesus said "It is finished" on the cross when he died for us, what are we still waiting for? Why are we called to keep our eyes on the horizon?

Here are three really important answers that the Scriptures give us:

**First, when Jesus returns, he will finish what he began in us.**

When we become followers of Jesus, as we were reminded in the baptisms at the start of this service, God makes us new, putting his spirit in us and beginning to change us from the inside out.

And in Philippians 1.6, Paul says he is confident of this, that He who began this good work in [us] will carry it through to completion in the day of Christ Jesus.

We will finally become the men and women that God intended us to be from the start, free of sin, reflecting his image perfectly.

I John 3:2 says

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we will see him as he is.

As Colossians 3:4 says

When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Part of what we long for when we wait for Jesus, then, is for Jesus to finish the miraculous work of sanctification and glorification.

**Second, when Jesus returns, he will not only finish what he began in our broken and rebellious interiors, making *us* right. He will finish what he began in this broken and rebellious world of ours and make *all things* right.**

When you think of a world that is so profoundly broken in so many terrible ways – war, poverty, trafficking, violence, homelessness, abuse of power, immorality, meaninglessness, despair – this is an incredible promise.

We are told that when Jesus returns, all that is evil, all that is wrong, all that is contrary to God, all that is in rebellion against God, all that is at the root of so much pain and suffering, will be removed once and for all.

Revelation 20.10, 14-15

The devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire . . . Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Then God will usher in the new creation

Revelation 21.1-5, 27

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! . . . the old order of things has passed away.”

He who is seated on the throne says, “I am making everything new!”

Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

And as a result, for God's people, there will never again be suffering or loss, as they enjoy a new creation that is free forever of all that is contrary to the perfect love and holiness of God.

Revelation 21.4-5

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

When Jesus returns, the night will end, the new day will dawn.

All that is evil will be eradicated

All that is broken will be rectified

All that is beautiful will be unveiled.

And – as Tolkien put it – all that is sad will come untrue.

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So part of what we long for when we wait for Jesus is for him to complete his work of making us, and making all things, new.

Important as those are, there is one more reason that we eagerly and vigilantly wait for the return of Jesus. The most important of them all. The gift not of what Jesus will do when he returns, but the gift of Jesus himself.

**When Jesus returns, we will finally enjoy once and for all a relationship with him in which there is no longer anything between us, and we will see him face to face, and enjoy intimate fellowship with him forever.**

Right now, even as fallen people in a fallen world, we are able to enjoy a rich and intimate relationship with him.

But two familiar passages remind us that the way we know and enjoy the Lord now is nothing compared to what our experience will be when he finally returns.

### I Peter 1.8-9

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

### I Corinthians 13.12

<sup>1</sup>For now we are looking in a mirror that gives only a dim reflection of reality – but then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

There will be a time when the night comes to an end and Jesus ushers in the day and we will see him face to face, and we will know him fully.

Some of you will remember my telling the story of the time when I was in seminary on the North Shore of Massachusetts, and Sharon my fiancée was 942 miles away in Cincinnati, Ohio, and we would have a phone date every Friday night. This was, of course, in pre-cell-phone days, so I would get dressed up and go down to the phone booth in the mail room of our dorm – step into a box 28 inches wide and 28 inches deep – and call Sharon.

One time the guys on my floor went to dinner in the next town over, waving to me in the phone booth as they headed out. When they got back I was still in the phone booth talking to Sharon – and I found out they had gone to dinner *and a movie*. That was our record call – 3 hours and 59 minutes.

When you are apart from one you love, you do what you need to do. But you also long for the day when you can see each other face to face.

Part of what we wait for when we wait for Jesus is the *fullness* of his presence, and the fullness of relationship with him, Jesus eye to eye, Jesus face to face.

### Revelation 21.2-3, 23

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, ... prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among his people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

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As we wrap up, let's let this passage become personal.

Jesus came, and he left. Some day – one day – he will return

In this season of Lent, this time of self-examination for followers of Christ, let me ask you:

- How vigilant is your watch for the coming of Jesus?
- How much have you given in to the temptation to grow slack, to let your affections grow cold, to let your flame burn down?
- In this broken world of ours, in what ways have you let yourself give in to despair? Or indifference? How have you allowed yourself to believe that things as they are now is things as they will always be?
- How do you find yourself making peace with a world at odds with God, rather than holding out hope for something we can't yet see?
- The hope of the Christian faith is the sure confidence that God keeps his promises, that he will have the last word. Have you given up hope that the bridegroom will ever come? That he will keep his promises?
- How much do you long for the one thing that matters over all other things, which is to live face to face with Jesus for eternity? How are you preparing yourself for that moment in the phone booths and prayer closets of this fallen world?

At the end of the book of Revelation, at the end of the New Testament, at the end of the **entire bible, it says this: Revelation 22.17-18, 20**

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!"

And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

[Jesus] says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Would you repeat that last line again with me?

Jesus says: "Yes, I am coming soon."

And we say: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."