



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

***The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida***

“In all the changes and chances!”

November 12, 2023

24nd Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25:1-13

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

A Homily by The Rev'd Jo P. Popham

Veterans Day originated as “Armistice Day” on Nov. 11, 1919, the first anniversary of the end of World War I, the “war to end all wars.” At the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918 – World War I had come to an end. We in the church often mark this day every year on the Sunday closest to November 11th by observing Veteran’s Day to honor those who serve and those who have served our nation for the cause of justice and freedom – in times of conflict and in times of peace. Sadly we have not learned to settle our differences peacefully, and WWI was just one more in a long succession of wars and conflicts beginning before written history and extending right into our own times. Today we hope for peace while we prayerfully remember the cost of war. In this place we come together to share our joys, but we also gather to help carry one another’s sorrow and grief as well. While Veteran’s Day is not a day to mourn those who gave the ultimate sacrifice – we do that on Memorial Day – we still recall those who did not return. I pray that veterans do not feel only remorse and regret this day. Many talk of their friends who helped shape their lives in the midst of war. Many Veterans speak of their time in the armed services as formative, not disruptive.

The story of the Ten Bridesmaids seems to be somewhat disruptive in the Gospel according to Matthew where the text focuses on the harsh judgment that will come at the end times, but we should always look at the Gospel as a whole – all four accounts. And we most assuredly should look at what is written in the rest of Matthew. The coming of Jesus – the Son of Man – for judgment is the theme of this portion of Matthew – judgment when we will see the Kingdom of God. And judgment will be not only for those who can “decode” the Word of God – for those who claim to understand what Jesus meant. Matthew described the end times in the 1st century as though it were coming soon

– in their lifetimes. For them it could have been anytime – even the very next day. So there was urgency in preparing.¹ One would be taken and another left – meaning to 1st century hearers that one would be saved and one would be lost and as Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica. This was never meant to be interpreted as it was in the later part of the 19th century by premillennial dispensationalists – as the rapture – when certain people would be scooped up into the Kingdom of Heaven and the rest of us would be left here with piles of their clothing. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it. It is ridiculous! Imagine arriving in Heaven with no clothes on. What would St. Peter think? And yet after the War Between the States that was the mindset. The union of the United States was in disunion, it was divided, and there was plenty of judgment talk that divided brothers from brothers and sisters from sisters and children from their parents. People wanted – no, they needed – hope. They wanted assurance that they and their loved ones would one day soon be with God – that there would be a test, and they would be found worthy of eternal life. And they came up with a formula for salvation – a scheme that would take all their suffering and turn it into joy. But the punishment would be severe for 1000 years for all the “others” – the dispensationalists, in particular.

For the people who were suffering persecution in Matthew's time, the faithful needed reassurance that they were saved. In today's reading we hear harsh language that – if we were to take literally – appears to say again that the foolish will be left behind with the door shut. Not so my friends. In Matthew's time the church was the elect people of God by the saving acts of Christ Jesus. The crucified Jesus – the Christ – died to save everyone, whether the people in Matthew's time knew it or not – and whether we know it or not. We are already saved. Judgment is up to God, and God has already saved us. Period. Full stop. End of statement. Would that it were that easy to convince people these days in the pews on Sundays – and in the street any day. If only the believers in Matthew's time, and the people who came up with the “left behind” theory after the war between the states, and us modern day folk could accept that the Kingdom of God is not just what awaits us in the future and for all eternity – but in the here and now.

The five foolish bridesmaids waited until the 11th hour to go and find more oil to be ready for Christ, the bridegroom. And it was too late when they came back, and the door was shut. Again, we should not take Matthew's story literally. Let us remember that our doors swing both ways – in and out – our doors are always open, to those who come early prepared to worship and those who come later still trying to let go of their burdens, having filled their lamps late. We all are fed at this table. Everyone is welcomed to experience the Kingdom of God – right now – right here.

We cannot underestimate the impact WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Wars in the Middle East and the devastating acts of tyranny against our nation have had on the lives of the people in our churches. Today – almost at the 11th hour and only one day after the 11th day in the 11th month, as we observe Veteran's Day, let us remember our Veterans. But let us remember the story of the five bridesmaids who were ready for the Lord when he came, who were prepared. Whatever changes were to come, however tired they were, they were ready, with sufficient oil and the wicks of their lamps trimmed.

Every night on our Facebook page, Jim and I pray an Order of Compline, the short worship service said at the close of the day. Often we pray:

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

We remember today the brave ones who have served this country and those who are still serving. They have given and continue to give us a measure of peace, and they surely have bought for us the freedom not only to sit on the front porch and watch the changes and chances of the world; they have secured for us the freedom to worship God and teach others about Jesus who saved everyone and saves us still. Our Lord paid for our being welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven – in the future and in the here and now. Let us work together to recall and honor our past and recognize and embrace the gifts we have to offer now as we look to the future, prepared and ready for what is to come. It is my

prayer and hope that we never get used to war. May we help make the world a place of hope in the face of tyranny. In spite of all the changes and chances of this life, let us sow hope by making this place more peaceful now, recalling God's eternal changelessness.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ The time of judgment might come as a thief in the night. Now we cannot imagine the Lord being a thief, but that is how Matthew described the time of judgment earlier (24:32–44) and as Paul spoke of the final judgment in his Letter to the Church in Thessalonica (5:2–4).