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Pentecost 23

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“How Soon?”

Text: Matthew 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

(Introit: Psalm 84:1, 3, 9-12)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The five foolish virgins in the Gospel today obviously knew the hymn we just sang: *The Bridegroom SOON Will Call Us* (LSB #514). Soon. That’s why they didn’t bring any extra oil. They weren’t going to need it. He was coming *soon*.

Well, there are **two warnings** for us today there.

First, is this: soon is in the eye of the beholder.

For example: ask a parent about Christmas on December 1st. They will tell you it’s going to be here *soon* and there’s not enough time to get everything ready and done. But ask a child about Christmas on December 1st, and she’ll tell you it’s an *eternity* away!

Soon is in the eye of the beholder.

The Bridegroom soon will call us, come to the wedding feast (v. 1). So how soon is soon?

Truth is, we don’t know. But it also depend on this: what is that call being talked about there? Is it Jesus coming again at the end of time? Yes. But we don’t know - *can’t* know - when that day will be. There may be still many years until that *soon*, that day.

Or will that call be for you the day when Jesus sends His angels to take you to the wedding feast *before* the Last Day, to call you in death to pass from this life to the next? Yes again. None of us knows when that day will come for us either. Maybe there are not many days until then for you. And not just if you’re old. Accidents, tragedy, disease, and more take many, as it is said: *too soon*, while they are still young.

The Bridegroom soon will call us. Soon. So be ready. For whenever your soon is.

But here’s the **second** warning there for us today, and it is coupled with the first: That if we don’t know when soon will be for us, then also don’t assume that you have enough oil. Don’t assume that you have enough faith, enough forgiveness, enough of God’s

Word, enough of the Lord's Body and Blood, enough justification, enough sanctification, enough mercy, enough Jesus, that you don't need these things any more. Some, I think, assume just that. That they're good. They got all they need.

But how long do you think it takes before the oil runs out? When absence from church, neglect of the Word, fasting from the Sacrament, and failure to receive the gifts of God makes one dry up? Maybe you've even felt that a little in your own life, when busyness or trouble or just plain sin has kept you away for a while, and you can tell; you can feel it. Something's not right. Your oil's drying up and your lamp is going out . . .

So **two good warnings** for us today, as we enter these last few weeks of the Church Year and focus on the End Times, the Last Day, and Jesus' return: (1.) we don't know when *soon* will be for us, and (2.) therefore don't assume we have enough.

Or maybe I could say it this way: live each day as if today was your soon, but also live each day as if your soon is still many years away.

What would such a life look like?

Well, it would be a life well-fed - both for what you need today and what you need for the long haul. A life where each day you read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's Word. A life of confession and repentance and receiving absolution. A life of often eating and drinking the Body and Blood of your Bridegroom. That no matter when your soon is, your lamp be lit and your oil be enough.

But also this: it would not only be a life well-fed, but a life well-*lived*. A life of reconciliation, both with your fellow believers and even with those who do not believe. How often, when someone dies, have you wished you had a few more days, to say what needed to be said, to say you were sorry, to forgive and be forgiven? But soon came sooner than we thought.

And it would be a life of good works, of service, of mercy, of care, compassion, and love. For also how often has anger or bitterness or grudges or the thirst for revenge or the love of sin caused a lamp to be snuffed out? The sin in us needs to be trimmed so the light can burn.

For *soon* the Bridegroom will call us.

But just as this parable of Jesus today provided us with **two warnings** - that (1.) we don't know when soon is and (2.) therefore don't assume we have enough, always be ready - it also provides us with **two realities**: that when the Bridegroom comes it will be a day of joy for some and a day of woe for others.

And the woe was described for us by the prophet Amos today. And his image of that day was quite vivid. For imagine what he said - fleeing from a lion only to run into a bear! Or imagine going into a dark house where you cannot see anything, and you've got your hand out, feeling for something, anything, solid, and when you finally touch something it's not a relief, but a serpent, plunging his fangs into your hand!

I don't know about you, but I don't want my soon, my Last Day, to be like that! But apart from Jesus, apart from getting into the wedding feast, that's exactly what that day will be like. And worse. For on that day, apart from Jesus, there will be no place to flee from the prowling satanic lion, and no relief from his fangs, plunged into you. The door will be shut. It will truly be a day, as Amos says, of woe. Woe that will not end.

But it need not be. *Blessed*, we sang in the Introit, *Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord of hosts*. In Jesus. In Jesus who tells us that He is the door for the sheep (John 10:7). In Jesus, who was devoured by our sins and by the satanic lion on the cross, but who then Himself devoured our sins and the satanic lion in His resurrection. In Jesus, who has provided the anti-venin for the poison of sin injected into us by Satan with His Body and Blood, given us here to eat and to drink. That in Jesus now, and trusting in Him now, we will also be with Him and rejoice with Him forever. That our soon and our Last Day not be the *beginning* but the *end* of our woe, and not the *end* but the *beginning* of our joy. Joy that will never end.

But to be in Jesus now means that while we await the wedding feast and the joy there that we cannot even begin to imagine, and while certainly we will have some joy here and now, there will be woe now. Woe because of the sin in the world and the sin in us. Woe because of the rebellion against God and His Word that we see in the world and that sometimes wells up in us. Woe as we are the targets of the prowling satanic lion and the flesh into which the serpent sinks his fangs. Woe as the world that persecuted and rejected Jesus persecutes and rejects those who are His as well. And maybe you could add a few woes of your own.

But the woes we experience now are nothing like the woes that will come at the end. For we are not in the darkness now. Jesus is here. The light is here. His forgiveness and life are here. For until the Last Day and His final coming, Jesus is not far, far, away, but coming in little, hidden ways even now. Breaking into our lives now to keep and sustain us, feed and forgive us, strengthen and protect us, for when your soon comes. He is here in water and words and bread and wine, that in the darkness you have a safe place to flee from the lion, and a safe place to place your hand. A safe place to hide. A refuge. Until *the Bridegroom [finally] calls us, come to the wedding feast*.

Until that day, until your soon, *encourage one another with these words*, St. Paul told the Thessalonian Christians, and us. But what are "these words?" Well, that the Lord knows who are His; those who have fallen asleep in Him. He knows those who are alive

still - you and I - *and* those who have gone before us. Or to put it in the words of Jesus' parable: those virgins still awake and those who have fallen asleep.

But when the Bridegroom comes, all in Jesus will enter into the feast. Jesus is faithful. We are not always. He always is. On that you can depend. On that we do depend.

So encourage one another, until our soon comes.

Encourage one another to remain faithful.

Encourage one another to remain in the Word.

Encourage one another to confess and repent, to forgive and to be absolved.

Encourage one another to receive the Lord's Supper often.

Encourage one another to have mercy and do good.

Encourage the old whose soon is near, and the young whose soon may also be near - or many years away.

Encourage the weary and weak, for you will one day be.

Encourage the mourning.

Encourage the doubting, and those under heavy burdens.

Encourage one another in all the times and trials of life.

For if, as we sang in the Introit, *even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at the altar of the Lord* - how much more us? A home, a nest, for us here, until our soon comes, and our home is not here at the altar of the Lord, but around His throne, forever.

Until *the Bridegroom [finally] calls us*.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.