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There is a famous story about a wedding set in Israel. This wedding had quite the altar party, with at least ten bridesmaids. It was an evening wedding, and each of the bridesmaids carried a small oil lamp. In this wedding though, rather than the father of the bride walking his daughter down the aisle, the groom was to escort the bride, and the bridesmaids to walk with their lamps in the wedding procession. However, the groom was delayed, he was so late that the bridesmaids fell asleep. Finally, at midnight the Groom arrived, and five of the bridesmaids noticed as their lamps began to dim that they had brought no oil. So they turned to the other five bridesmaids and asked if they could have some of their oil. A discussion ensues, and they were told to go quickly and buy more oil from the market, lest in sharing their oil, they run out of oil too and completely ruin the wedding procession. Unfortunately, while the five bridesmaids were out buying oil, the groom showed up and the procession began, and those poor bridesmaids missed the procession. It is not difficult to imagine that a bride and groom might be upset that suddenly half the bridesmaids are missing, and so when the bridesmaids returned they were not allowed to enter the wedding.

As you might have guessed, this is not a romantic comedy but Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins. This is also the basis for the Advent hymn which we sang this Sunday and last called, *Rejoice, Rejoice Believers*.

*Rejoice, rejoice, believers!
And let your lights appear;
The evening is advancing,
And darker night is near.
The Bridegroom is arising,
And soon he will draw nigh;
Up, watch in expectation!
At midnight comes the cry.*

We might also remember the Sunday school song that goes, *give me oil in my lamp...keep me burning til the break of day*. It is an interesting parable and hymn, loaded with symbolism, but one that does not make a lot of sense to the modern hearer. There are a lot of cultural differences between a wedding in Jesus' day, and what we are used to seeing in our own day. We would expect the time for

the Groom's arrival to have been known, for the lamps and the oil to be provided for by the bride and groom, and even if the lamps went out, it probably still would not have been a big deal. But to those listening to Jesus tell the parable this all made sense. A wedding included the entire village, and it was custom for bridesmaids to carry lamps, and they were expected to have enough oil for the procession.

However, even though the bridesmaids are named *foolish virgins* by Jesus, they are not all that bad. From Jesus' other parables and from elsewhere in the Scriptures, we see that there is a clear designation between the good and the bad. The good are caught up to meet Jesus, they go into the wedding wearing the wedding garments provided by them. The bad are those that either refuse to accept Jesus' invitation because they would rather do other things, for which they provide lame and poor excuses. But the bridesmaids who ran out of oil because they brought no oil with them, are different. They were chosen to be bridesmaids, they were included in the wedding, and they had an important role to play. They do not represent the hypocritical, the wicked, or the ungodly. Instead, they represent the faithful Christians who are not ready to meet Jesus, who is the groom, when He comes. They are not ready because they have been negligent in prayer, or they have been slothful, or they have not availed themselves to the Sacraments of the Church and all the grace that is available to us through the Church. They represent the Christian who plans poorly for the coming of Jesus. And Jesus ends his parable with the warning, *watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.*

Now on this fourth Sunday in Advent, with one week left before Christmas, each one of us likely has a list pressing on us of things we need to have prepared before next Saturday and Sunday. We will each probably spend some time this week wondering if we have finished our Christmas shopping. Have we forgotten a gift for someone? When should we begin preparing our Christmas meal? How disappointing would it be for us to forget to give a gift to a certain family member or friend we really loved? How embarrassing would it be to run out of food during Christmas dinner? We do everything in our power to be prepared for Christmas and the festivities of this time of year. And sometimes, we get so caught up in these affairs of much less importance during this season that it nearly empties the oil from our lamps, and we endure Christmas with little to no joy. And with no consummation of happiness with our Saviour who comes to be born for us all.

Maybe some have just accepted the fact that they shall have a blue Christmas. Either due to grief or the cares of the world, their lamps are burning

dim, the oil has nearly run out, and they do not know where to get more. We would do anything in our power for our lamps to burn bright this Christmas season with peace, hope, and joy, and especially joy. But that takes the oil of the Holy Spirit, oil that cannot be bought from any market. How do we find this oil this last week before Christmas? We can find it if we obey Jesus and *Watch*. The kind of watching that Jesus commands us to do is not passive, Jesus calls us to be proactive, to be vigilant, *to make straight the way of the Lord*, to pray and fast, to study the Scriptures, to seek after Him. This also means not getting caught up in the little things, not letting situations and individuals steal our peace and joy. It means confessing our sins, opening ourselves up to receive God's grace, and embracing the Hope and Love of God. It means delighting in the little unexpected joys of the season. It means keeping our minds and hearts focused on one of the greatest events in all of History. That greatest moment of history occurred when the transcendent God came down to earth, was made flesh, and was born not in a bright palace or glittering temple, but in a dim and dark manger, the Child who is our salvation, our peace, our hope, and our joy. This is the Child who is the greatest gift of pure love that we have ever been given. He is the only gift that can give us fulfillment, the only gift that can truly change our lives, the gift that makes all other gifts under the Christmas tree pale in comparison.

We have one week left until Christmas, and there is still so much to do, but this morning and the rest of this week let us attend to that which is truly important, let us trim and prepare our lamps.

*See that your lamps are burning;
Replenish them with oil;
Look now for your salvation,
The end of sin and toil.
The watchers on the mountain
Proclaim the Bridegroom near;
Go meet him as he cometh,
With alleluias clear.*