

## BEHOLD, THE BRIDEGROOM COMETH

by Pastor Hyveth Williams

Theme: Being Ready for Jesus to Come  
Call to Worship: #815, Watchfulness  
Opening Song: #340, Jesus Saves  
Closing Song: #604, We Know Not the Hour  
Key Text: Matthew 25:1-13

-----

Weddings are times of joyous celebration, even if we've not been personally married. I'm sure we've all had occasion to share in the flurry of activities and nervous anticipation which lasts for at least 46 hours from the rehearsal to the reception. We're fortunate our weddings only last about 48 hours. In the time of Jesus they lasted a whole week during which time regular domestic duties and religious obligations were suspended so that the wedding party and all the guests could relish the full delight of the occasion. The high point of the week of festivities was when the bridegroom came to the bride's home to take her to their new home. It was an event marked by pomp and ceremony with great pageantry and drama.

The bride would ask ten of her friends who were chaste—un-married young ladies whom she believed were able to endure the rigors of this tradition, to be her bridesmaid. Their special task was to wait with her for the arrival of the bridegroom, then lead a grand procession from her house to the marriage home. Usually, this event took place at night, so the major responsibility of the bridesmaids was to carry bright blazing lamps or torches before the marriage procession as they danced with joy, singing and shouting glad tidings, leading a rejoicing wedding party to its final destination. Now the time when the bridegroom would arrive was also always kept a secret, even though he was required by custom and practice to send a messenger ahead of him shouting: "behold, the bridegroom cometh! Come out to meet him!" No one but the groom knew the exact moment of his arrival. It was to be a surprise! It was to be an event fitted with fun, good humor, spontaneous mirth, a happy occasion when the bridesmaids, alert and ready, would rush into the streets making so much noise and laughter they'd wake up the entire neighborhood! Then the neighbors would stream out of their homes, banging pots and pans, adding to the glee, as they joined the procession which continued to swell as it moved along until it filled the streets. It was against this familiar background of sheer joy and outlandish excitement that Jesus built His parable on the ten virgins with dramatic skill. (Read Matthew 25:1-13).

The bride, as we all know, represents the church, the second Eve. But she is not the focus of this parable. Instead, the Bridegroom. Jesus Christ, the second Adam, and the bridesmaids, who represent every individual member of the living body of Christ, are under scrutiny in this powerful parable.

Sometimes we forget that this is a story about one of the most joyous events in the human experience; but mostly, we neglect to notice how much all of the ten bridesmaids were alike and fail to find and heed the warning in verse 13 which says: "Therefore keep watch, because you do

not know the day or the hour.”

All were called and chosen by the bride, then set apart from the rest of the community to conduct the special task of leading the grand procession! All were virgins—free from impurity, unspoiled by the prevailing passions of the day; unspoiled by the seductive sirens of sin. They were fresh and dean, just as God sees us when we lift up Christ in our lives and are clothed in His righteousness! All took their lamps—the Word of God which is a light unto our paths—and went out from the world to wait in the sanctuary of salvation for the arrival of the bridegroom.

All had oil, the Holy Spirit, in those lamps which burned brightly as they began to wait for that uncertain, unknown time when the bridegroom would come.

All got drowsy and began to sleep as none could call upon inner resources to help them stay awake to watch and wait with the bride. It is a human condition that those who labor for the Lord will get tired and drowsy and dose off. There's no reason to despair because we, the Laodecian Church have been infected by lukewarmness and are drowsy and dosing off! But it's time to wake up. It's game time and if you are spiritually sleeping you will miss the big plays. Here's how I know we are asleep:

When Roger Clemens of the Boston Red Sox winds up and lets loose a ball which strikes out the opposing team, I don't see the fans in Fenway Park sitting looking around at each other saying, "Nice play." They stand to their feet and shout "Roger! Roger! Roger!" When Emmett Smith of the Dallas Cowboys football team catches the ball and bobs and weaves his way from the 10 yard line all the way to the goal, overcoming every obstacle the opposition can throw his way, to score a touchdown, people in the stadium don't just yawn and nudge each other, nodding their approval. They erupt into a round of applause that is deafening!

Yet one greater than Clemens and Smith, Him who is the Holy Spirit, is with us, inspiring as He teaches us. Yet week after week we come to worship and some of us don't even want to sing a hymn of praise! When we get a vision of Christ it makes us want to jump and sing and shout all at the same time! When we all get to heaven Rev 19:1-10 says we will rejoice, and be glad, and give Him glory at the marriage feast of the lamb. Some of us are out of practice when it comes to praise and need to begin now so we can do it well then!

All 10 virgins were asleep as we are now and had to be jarred awake by the midnight cry, "Behold the bridegroom cometh! Come out to meet him!"

All of them rose up with glad expectation and trimmed their lamps—meaning they began to rehearse the wonders and grace of the groom. This was generously laced with reciting of Psalms and Scriptures as the parable comes to a gripping conclusion.

Only one thing distinguished some from the others—five were wise enough to take extra oil and five were foolish enough not take extra oil with them for what they all knew could be a long, long wait.

Imagine the frustrated frenzy which must have followed when the bridegroom's messenger

announced his coming and the five foolish bridesmaids realized they had run out of oil and had none in reserve. Try to capture the urgency in the bargaining and begging recorded in verse 8: (Read). How tragic to come so close and miss out on the one thing for which they hoped and planned for so long!

The wisdom of the wise and the folly of the foolish virgins have three important lessons for us who are guardians of the torches, the lamps, in these last darkening days of the long anticipated arrival of the bridegroom.

1. There's a time and a way to prepare for the arrival of the Bridegroom and it's not when we hear the midnight cry—"Behold, the bridegroom cometh!" The time to get ready is now! Not during the demanding moment or crisis hour, but today, while it is yet today! If our Adventist heritage has taught us anything, it has left an indelible reminder of how easy it is to fall into the folly of the five foolish virgins. In the 1840's when preachers proclaimed the Second Coming of Christ, thousands believed and left the world of ordinary existence to wait for that extraordinary event. And, oh, how brightly their lamps burned in that brief period of time. But, when Jesus did not come as they predicted, most of them left in a frustrated frenzy, some pretending to purchase new oil of understanding which not only denied their former beliefs but denounced the message of the Millerite Movement in the end. Only a few remained faithful to the message. They left us our legacy of how important it is to be prepared for the long haul.

Today, as we wait in the long aftermath of that great disappointment, many are no better prepared than the members of the Millerite Movement who left, and like the five foolish virgins were locked out.

All around us are conflicts and confusing messages which are devoted to enticing us from our faith, or to waste and misuse the grace-gift of holy oil which is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. For example, a recent *Time* magazine article shared conclusions of biblical scholars who said most of what is reported in the Gospels to have been said by Jesus were really never said by Him, and that Jesus was a myth, and His crucifixion a farce! Well, I can't prove if all the words are His or not—but I know this, when I first read Luke 18:40-43 and heard Jesus ask: "What do you want me to do for you?" I said to be free of shame and pain and the hazards of sin, Jesus came into my life and totally transformed me and restored my dignity so that now I can be numbered among His saints who praise His name day and night until He comes!

I may not be able to prove that this living Word is all that it is reported to be to satisfy those scholars, but I know that when we read, heard, and obeyed the instructions so generously and clearly given, the Boston Temple, which was once a dying church of 27 members was resurrected, revitalized and five years later we have 230 members, and more than 350 in attendance each week!

We now know that to be truly prepared to meet the bridegroom, we must have a personal relationship with Him before He comes again. We must become His friends and be ready to carefully and deliberately lay down our lives for Him as we lift Him up so that He can draw others to Him. He said, "I have called you friends." Will you, friends, stand loyal in your bodily life?

The unprepared bridesmaids were not His friends for they did not take the time beforehand to get to know Him well. If they had, they would have figured that He was the type to savor the surprise of His arrival and linger longer than expected. They banked on some absurd idea that He would be so anxious to consummate His marriage He would not wait too long to take His bride. If they had personal knowledge of the Bridegroom they would have known that for the joy that was set before Him He endured and prolonged the pleasure and anticipation of the great homecoming! If they knew Him they would have brought extra oil with them! Do you know Him, and are you prepared for the long wait? The oil of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling Christ, prepares us ahead of the event for the breakthrough of our Lord in each day's experience as well as His anticipated arrival, soon, in the clouds of angels.

Just imagine if you will, that we are sitting here and there's a noise, something like a dust storm and the roof is suddenly blown off. We huddle together; then we hear crashing of buildings, screeching of cars coming to a sudden stop, screaming people. Something big is happening! People are running to and from and frenzied mothers try to locate lost, screaming children. We realize it's the Second Coming. We look up and see in the distance a dark cloud like a fist coming closer and closer. Do you run and hide—or rush to welcome Him? Think on these things while we wait for that grand and awesome day. The sentiments expressed in this old folk tune should be our prayer every day as we prepare for the grand climax of our hope in the Second Coming:

Give me oil in my lamp,  
keep me burning, Hot! Hot! Hot!  
Give me oil in my lamp I pray.  
Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning,  
keep me burning till the break of day.

Don't feel bad or apologize if your lamps are burning bright while the flames of others are flickering out. We all, as bridesmaids of Jesus, have the opportunity to be filled with His Holy Spirit so we can say, "Come, Hosanna—Come quickly for we are ready NOW!"

2. There's going to be a time when Christians should, must, and will say no to other Christians who beg to borrow from our reserves! The time is not yet, but it will come! (Read verses 8-9). Go home and share now, freely giving what you have so freely received, knowing that a time will come when you too will have to say no to a brother or sister who wants to borrow oil from your sparse reserves. The response of the five wise virgins may seem selfish, cruel, and insensitive, but in reality it's an honest statement about life's crises. For example, you study hard, attend prayer meetings every week at sacrifice to your time, and many other wonderful things you could do. You give up some fascinating, attractive Saturday activities you could do with your kids in the world to spend the Sabbath with them in church; you plan your lives and vacations around campmeetings, and when calamity comes and it is the end of the waiting for Jesus, you will be filled and they will be empty. Then they will say, please study with us, please share what you have learned at campmeeting or in worship each week! At that time, you must be wise enough to discern that if you give some of your reserves to those foolish beggars all the lamps will go out before the night's task is completed and you will be forced to also drop out of the grand procession.

Study now, share now, take your tapes, videos and books and spread them like the leaves of autumn. Soon you will go down from this mount of transfiguration into the valley where death and sin casts their long shadow on all inhabitants. But remember, when the trumpet of the Lord shall sound time will be no more, don't take the time to share your resources and reserves. Be like the wise virgins who said: (Read verse 9).

In the excitement of the announcement of the bridegroom's arrival they forgot that normal life was suspended for the wedding celebration. Every shop in the village was closed. Even if there was a Seven-Eleven, it was midnight and all the merchants were in bed. Jesus wants us to grapple with the question: Why did the foolish virgins run the risk of running out of oil? But more specifically, Why do we run the risk of running out of oil to cause our lights to go out when we see the signs, even hear the call "Behold, the bridegroom cometh!" We know we cannot borrow the power of the Holy Spirit but must be filled, personally, by Him!

3. There's a time when it will be too late, when the moment of opportunity will pass and never come again. (Read vs. 10-12). There's no more pathetic, poignant picture in the Scripture than those five foolish virgins standing at the door, banging away, shouting, begging: "Lord, Lord, open up for us!" They learned as we must that there will be a time when we'll ask and will not receive; when we will seek and not find! When we will knock and the door will not be opened unto us!

Imagine how devastating it must have been when they heard the bridegroom say: (Read verse 12). They could hear the joy of the wedding banquet, the laughter, the music and dancing, the sounds of celebration but the door was shut! Tennyson caught the pathos of the closed door in his poem, Late, Late, So Late.

Late, late, so late! And dark the night and chill  
Late, late, so late! But we can enter still  
Too late, too late! Ye cannot enter now

No light had we: for that we do repent;  
And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.  
Too late, too late! Ye cannot enter now.

No light: so late! And dark and chill the night!  
O, let us in, that we may find the light!  
Too late, too late: ye cannot enter now.

Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?  
O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!  
No, no, too late! Ye cannot enter now.

(From Guinevere" and based on the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. See St. Matthew 25.)

Friends there's a time when it will be too late—not for God, but for us! The abundant life is offered to us every living moment, new every morning, but so often we are too busy with our own perspectives and miss the overtures of God. Remember, repeated resistance will result in a life which ends with the rejection of God's invitation to live forever with Him. Too often we come to that point and realize we are on the outside of the closed door. Like the mother from Hawaii who died on the compound in Waco, Texas. She knew that her life was in danger, but was afraid to leave without her husband. When the federal agents began to clean up after the conflagration which took the life of David Koresh and some eighty members of his cult, she was found at the back door with her hand on the knob, even in death, desperately trying to escape, but it was too late! Be alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour when it will be announced "Behold, the bridegroom is here!"

-----

**About the Sermon Writer:** Dr. Hyveth B. Williams is the Senior Pastor at Campus Hill Church in Loma Linda, California, and also an adjunct professor of religion at Loma Linda University. At the time this sermon was written, Dr. Williams was senior pastor at the Boston Temple in Boston, Massachusetts.