

Sermon for November 9, 2014 (Proper 27, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Psalm 78:1-7; Matthew 25:1-13

Title: Look! Here is the bridegroom!

“At midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’” (Matthew 25:6)

Imagine yourself standing inside a noisy, bustling building.

You are standing by a set of doors through which hundreds of people have just walked, all of them moving with purpose in the same direction straight past you. It’s been about 15 minutes that you have been standing there, patiently waiting.

There has been a steady stream of people who have disembarked, having arrived in this place from all across the continent.

You are at the airport, of course. And you are there to pick up someone about whom you care deeply. A good friend. Someone who **really** knows you. Someone who makes you laugh and makes us feel completely at ease – like you can just be yourself.

Unfortunately, it’s been quite some time since you’ve seen each other. Too long. But this friend called to say that she is flying in for a visit.

The Arrival Board reports that the flight is now at the gate, so you are looking carefully at each face as the people come through the doors.

Finally, she walks through and she sees you, and her face lights up.

And right away, you feel it. The light of recognition! The power and joy of reunion! The excitement of real human connection!

Do you know that feeling? Can you recall it even now? That amazing feeling of seeing someone you care about whom you have not seen in a long time?

My friends, this is the feeling which the apostle Paul wants to inspire in his beloved community in Thessalonica.

Because this feeling is the fruit of the Parousia.

Our two readings today – from 1st Thessalonians and Matthew – are remarkably linked in telling the same kind of story.

Both deal directly with the return of Christ. How can that be a surprise?

It's the same theme every November in the Lectionary cycles, as we conclude the Church Year in the run-up to the start of the new Year on the first Sunday of Advent.

Every November we read about the apocalypse.

The last things, the grande finale of salvation history.

Consider for a moment the background of the reading from Matthew.

As we know, the Lord Jesus always teaches by using objects which were very familiar to the common people. In this parable, he is talking about a wedding – something VERY common to his listeners.

It is more difficult for us today, because we do weddings and marriage quite differently in our culture.

In the Hebrew culture of that time, a man became betrothed to a woman when her family agreed to the suitor's proposal. Once the parties made an agreement, the two were then legally married, but they did not live or sleep together until the marriage was consummated at a wedding feast, a wedding banquet.

Once the feast was prepared (which could take up to a year), the groom went to retrieve his bride from her home.

He brought her to **his** home, along with her family, where the feast was prepared and ready to go.

When everyone arrived, the feast began. Before too long, the bride and groom were escorted to a private room to consummate the relationship while the families continued to eat and drink and dance.

This is the scenario to which Jesus refers in today's parable. The bridegroom has gone to retrieve his bride and to bring her and her family to his home to celebrate.

No one knew precisely when the wedding party would return, so it was the job of the attendants – in this case, the bridesmaids – to keep the lights on and to keep everything ready until they returned.

What also makes it difficult for us to understand is that, unlike our own, theirs is a society in which honor is the paramount value in all relationships.

The groom **HAS** to put on a good show for his new bride and her family.

Imagine what shame he would experience if they finally arrived at his home and all the lights had gone out, the fire was dead, and the feast was not ready?

THAT is what's at stake here – the honor of the groom.

What are the bridesmaids supposed to do?

Be equipped and be ready throughout the day and night in order to protect the honor of the groom.

You may be surprised to know that the scenario in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is very similar.

He is writing to this very early community in Greece who are struggling with their understanding of death, and the afterlife, and the return of Messiah.

Do you know that this is the ONE and only passage of scripture upon which the entire idea of the rapture is based? This is it, when Paul speaks of being "caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17).

Those who preach about the rapture use this as their primary text, but they are mistaken. The word "rapture" is not found here nor anywhere else in the Bible.

In fact, the idea of the rapture is not biblical in any sense at all.

It was not taught by ANY church until a few American preachers among the wild religious movements of the 19th century!

It may not be something you think about much, but the rapture remains an important idea in general American society. Just this summer, HBO released a new series based on the idea of the rapture – the sudden disappearance of a large number of people.

In the New Testament, the key Greek word in question is “Parousia”, and it is typically translated as “the coming” or “the appearance” of the Lord.

In its most simplest meaning, “Parousia” means “presence”.

Do you know how the word was commonly used in the Roman Empire in Pauls’ day?

“Parousia” was the coming of a king who arrives on a royal visit to a subject city. As the entourage of the king approached, the citizens of the city were obliged to go out to meet him along the way. It was their duty, and at times their privilege, to welcome the king and to escort him back to their city.

How could they honor their king if they could not even be bothered to come out and greet him on the way?

Parousia was the coming of a bridegroom who returns to his home with his new bride and her family.

As the bridegroom approached, the wedding attendants were obliged to protect the honor of the groom by going out all together to meet him.

How could they honor the groom if they could not even keep the lights on for him so that he bring his bride and her family back to a warm and well-lit house?

Parousia is the arrival of a dear friend whom you have not seen in a long time. As the flight approaches the airport, you drive there and park in order to make sure that you are ready to greet her when she steps through those doors.

How could you say that you value her friendship – that you honor her presence in your life – if you could not make room in your busy schedule to meet her at the airport?

What is the point of going out to meet the king on the way? What is the point of going out to greet the bridegroom as he arrives? What is the point of going to the airport to greet your friend as she disembarks from the airplane?

How did St. Paul conclude this passage?

“And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thess. 4:18).

The good news, the basis of our hope, is that we will be with the Lord forever.

So how do you and I remain alert and prepared to greet Christ and to welcome Christ into our homes, our cities, our lives?

Perhaps you’ve seen the call to honor in our new mission statement. In this statement, we commit to do three basic things all of the time: To celebrate, to honor, and to serve.

We are learning how to **HONOR THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN ONE ANOTHER.**
(repeat)

It’s like we’re at the airport waiting for our long-lost friend to walk through the doors, scanning each face for that glimpse of recognition.

I do not know what kind of future historical event might make the physical presence of the Lord manifest on this planet.

I have no idea about any of this, but I DO know that what matters most – what will enable all of us to be spiritually prepared for whatever comes – is to honor the Parousia, the Presence of Christ right now in the face of every person we meet.

My friends, can you wake up each day with that sense of anticipation, expecting to recognize the face of your friend, the Lord, in your spouse, your children, your neighbor, your co-worker?

I hope so, because that is the way life is meant to be lived. Amen.