

Many couples take a year or more between the engagement and the wedding. They need to reserve the reception hall and the church, order the dresses and tuxes, and arrange details from decorations to rings to honeymoon. They take a year to prepare. But no matter how far in advance they set the date for the wedding, the last 48 hours will be complete mayhem. Somehow the wedding day always comes as a surprise.

Christians live in perpetual preparation. We believe that one day Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. But we don't know when. We live in preparation for the day we meet Christ face to face. But when the day arrives, it will feel sudden, as though we never had a chance to prepare.

Today's parable concerns preparation: A man living with ten maidens is engaged to someone else, and the maidens seem quite happy about it. He goes to the home of his fiancée to complete the negotiations with her father. Meanwhile, the ten maidens, having prepared a party, grab their lamps and wait outside to greet the groom and welcome the bride to her new home. The groom is late. We don't know why. But it makes you wonder if the bride's father was having second thoughts about the guy. Meanwhile, the maidens get tired and fall asleep. In the middle of the night, someone announces that the groom is coming. But five maidens are out of oil, and the others won't share. The foolish maidens run off to buy oil from who-knows-where at midnight, while the wise ones start the big party. I guess this proves that shopping is foolish, but partying is wise. When the foolish ones return, the groom won't let them in, and they do not all live happily ever after.

Jesus is the bridegroom. The maidens are the Christian community. Jesus goes away, but we believe he is coming back. Some of us will be prepared; others will not. When he returns, it will feel sudden, even though we've been preparing for a long time. Those who are ready will enter paradise, but the others will not.

As we near the close of our church year, today's parable invites us to prepare for the end. We do not know when Christ is coming. We do not know the day of our death. We spend our lives in preparation, like a couple during engagement, as if we had plenty of time. But one day Jesus will return. Is there something you still need to do before Christ comes? A dream unfulfilled? Plans undone? Things you've wanted to say? Sins you haven't confessed? If you knew that Christ would return this fall, what would you do? The wise maidens had extra oil. What do we still need to do for Christ the bridegroom to welcome us into the hall of eternal life?