November 8, 2026 • The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 • Psalm 78:1-7 • 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 • Matthew 25:1-13

Keep Watch

If you have spent a lot of time in certain Evangelical Christian circles, or maybe read books like the *Left Behind* series or *The Late Great Planet Earth*, I can imagine you might have had a pretty strong reaction to our reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians this morning. That passage about being "caught up in the clouds... to meet the Lord in the air" is pretty central to the notion of the Rapture. So, for that matter, are chapters 24 and 25 of the Gospel according to Matthew, including the passage we read this morning. So, if you're having some PTSD symptoms or just a general unease about where we're going with these Scriptures today, let me invite you take a deep breath and assure you that there is nothing to fear.

The idea of the Rapture as it's been taught and popularized in much of the American Protestant church, was first solidified by the English Evangelical teacher John Nelson Darby in 1827. For some context, that's two years before the invention of the Graham cracker and twelve years after the invention of dental floss. The idea got a lot of attention in the 1970s thanks to Hal Lindsey and his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and again in the mid-90s with the publication of Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series. The key idea of what's called a pretribulation rapture is that Jesus would come and carry away all of his faithful followers to heaven in order to spare them from a seven-year period of "tribulation" involving a lot of disease and bloodshed and death among those remaining on earth. At the end of the tribulation, Jesus and his faithful followers would return again and begin Christ's thousand-year reign on earth. And I think it's fair to say that part of the reason this idea caught hold of so many people's attention and imagination in the 1970s and the 1990s is that it felt like surely the world was on the brink of coming to an end. These were times of tremendous social and political upheaval, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the first Gulf War, the sexual revolution, and the rise of the Internet. Surely, the end must be near, many people thought, or hoped, or feared. Surely, the end must be near, many people are still thinking or hoping or fearing today.

"He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end," we say almost every Sunday as part of the Nicene Creed. That, in contrast to the nineteenth-century writing of John Nelson Darby, goes back to the council of Nicea in the year 325. That's the church's foundational statement expressing the Christian hope, along with asserting that "we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." But we say all this knowing full well that it is beyond our knowing. Our fundamental assurance as Christians, in the words of the catechism that appears in the Book of Common Prayer, "is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (page 862) The rest is details—details we can speculate about and try to glean from scriptures like these, but not know for certain. At least not until we see God face to face.

Way back last November, on the first Sunday of Advent at the start of this church year, I stood up here and did some wondering about these chapters in the Gospel of Matthew that talk about the coming of the Son of Man, or the Human One. When Jesus talks about "'the Human One coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory… [and sending] out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and [gathering] his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other," I wonder what that looks like, as I said last year, from the perspective of a God who is eternal—a God who is not bound by time and space as we are. I wonder whether it's really a future thing or if it's rather an *eternal* thing—a thing that was and is and is to come beyond the reach of time, that breaks into our time and space in ways that are impossible to understand or to predict.

In a couple of weeks, as we continue reading through chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, we're going to hear the parable of the sheep and the goats, where Jesus talks about the Human One coming in all his glory and gathering all the nations before his throne and

sorting them out based on how they treated him. And by "how they treated him," Jesus clarifies, he means how they treated one of the least of these his siblings who were hungry and thirsty, who were strangers and foreigners, who were naked and sick and in prison. That parable tells us, plain as day, that the Human One is coming to us every day—as those who are hungry and those who are thirsty, as strangers and foreigners, as the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. The second coming is happening all around us, all the time.

And so the question that Jesus is asking in this parable of the bridesmaids—and asking with some urgency—is this: Are you ready? Are you ready to meet Jesus? Are you ready for the bridegroom to come to your door?

At one point this week, I found myself getting grumpy with the wise, prepared bridesmaids who refused to share their supplies of oil with the foolish ones whose oil ran out. They're going into a wedding banquet—entering into the abundant life of the kin-dom of God! Why are they so concerned about having enough, as if anything could be scarce in the presence of the bridegroom? But Mirabella Maeve pointed out to me that if we're called to be light to the world, to let our light shine out like a city on a hill, we need to tend to our resources. Maybe some of you understand how drained you can feel when you spend your life taking care of everyone around you and forget to take care of yourself. When you fill everyone else's lamp and there's no fuel left over to let your light shine. It's not a matter of being selfish, or of hoarding resources, it's a matter of stewardship, of making sure we're taking good care of the gifts we've been given.

We're invited not just to show up to this magnificent wedding feast, we're invited to participate in the transformation that God is working in us and in the world. We've been asked to provide light for the banquet, to let the light God has placed in us shine out all around us, to make the scary world a little brighter and shine like a lighthouse at the edge of a stormy sea. And we're in this for the long haul, so it's important to keep stocked up on the resources that will help us shine our light through to the end.

How do we do that? I suspect among all of us we'll have many different answers. I hope that prayer is one that many of us share—the time we spend in conversation with God, and cultivating the awareness of God's presence, is time charging our spiritual batteries. I think it's part of my job as your priest to try to load up my sermons every Sunday with as much fuel for your lamps as I can, to make sure you can keep shining, keep hope alive, keep lighting the world throughout the week. Fundamentally, self-care is an essential part of keeping your torch burning. Because you can't love your neighbor as yourself if you've forgotten how to love yourself. I think sometimes some of us need a reminder that the harsh language we use to criticize ourselves is language we would never use with someone else, and that it's OK to treat ourselves with as much kindness as we show to others.

"Keep watch, therefore," Jesus reminds us, for the bridegroom is coming all around us, all the time. May we keep our lamps burning, keep our light shining, so we can be ready to welcome him.

Amen.