Back when I worked in the poultry industry, we briefly had a guy in charge of the turkey department who had a very curious style of management and by curious, I mean not very good. This is how it worked: Whenever a problem occurred, he would call a meeting and demand answers as to why the problem had occurred. Individuals would start explaining the various issues, but they would always be cut off by a demand to know who made the decision that caused that specific problem. It did not matter if the problem was caused by a flood induced grain shortage in Iowa or a cold snap in Modesto that led to increased power bills, he was always convinced that there was a guy who was deliberately sabotaging turkey production in Turlock. The meetings would go on until finally in exasperation someone would volunteer a name. The meeting would be adjourned and he would go and find this individual and yell at them because he was convinced that they were the root of all of his problems. And as I said he did not last very long because his management style never solved any real problems. I have a theory as to why he did this and that was because the real reasons for the problems were often complex and difficult to solve, while blaming an individual was easy. And while I would love to say this problem of looking for easy solutions is the exclusive domain of mangers of Turkey departments in west coast poultry farms, I think it is something we all fall prey to at various times. When problems come around that are difficult and may require something of us, we like to punt and find less complicated solutions or at least choose to focus on the less circumstantial parts of what is being discussed. Today’s reading from Thessalonians is one such thing that is at risk for such an interpretation and so I applaud those who put the lectionary together that they have coupled it with the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids from Matthew’s Gospel and let me explain why.

First let’s start with the passage from Thessalonians. This verse gets a lot of play in certain Christian circles because of the following line: “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.” This line has been used as a cornerstone for a teaching known as the rapture. Before we get into what it means I should tell you that the concept of the rapture has a fairly recent pedigree. It was popularized and probably thought up by a Plymouth Brethren teacher named John Nelson Darby in the 1830’s. So as far as ideas within the church go it is one that would not have been recognized by Christian’s for about 92% of the Church’s years of existence. But enough of that; let’s take a moment and see what is meant by this term rapture. It basically posits that there will be an end-time event where all living true Christian believers will rise and be snatched away from earth, while those who are not Christian will be stuck on earth with the antichrist and have to watch reruns of *Sigmund and the Sea Monsters* all day. Now I don’t really want to get into whether or not I agree with this theory but will point out that the Episcopal theory of the end times is that however it is done it will be done in good taste. What I want to point out, and what my objection to it has more to do with focusing on it at all, because it seems that with the rapture or any other focus on the end times, we are focusing on the wrong thing. For it seems that much of the reason people like positing and speculating about the end times is because like my Turkey manager friend it is much easier than focusing on the things of consequence. And that thing of consequence is what we get in the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. If you have forgotten, the quick version is that some of the bridesmaids were prepared and some of the bridesmaids were not. And like all parables this one is really not about wedding customs in first century Judea but rather is about being prepared for Christ’s coming. And it ends with the rather ominous words of Jesus saying, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

So I realize that up to this point this sermon has been a sort of disjointed mess, but let me see if I can pull it all together. The point is that while it may be interesting to speculate about the return of Christ and who gets sucked up by the big vacuum in the sky I am not sure if any of it matters that much. What I mean is that if we start with the premise from today’s parable that we are to always be prepared for the bridegroom, does it really matter how it all goes down? Here is a silly example but hopefully it helps illustrate what I am getting at. Let’s say I invite you to go skiing with me and tell you that I will pick you up Tuesday morning at 8:00 am. Now let’s say that your skis are in storage and you have lost your ski pants and so need to pick up a new pair. However, instead of doing any of that you spend the whole time pondering what vehicle I am going to be driving when I pick you up. You think maybe I will bring my car, but then you think that might be a little tight so instead I might bring Amy’s car because it has a little more room. You then start speculating that I might rent a car or perhaps by a new one and spend hours researching and contemplating what kind of car I might buy or rent. The inevitable result is that when I come to pick you up Tuesday morning you do not have your skis nor your ski pants making it impossible for you to actually go skiing. How you were going to get there might have been interesting to think about (although I am not sure why) but it does nothing to prepare for the reason you are being picked up in the first place. In my mind that is what it like with people who make all the fuss about the logistics of the Second Coming. If we are not prepared does it really matter if Jesus beams up all the believers into heaven or if Kirk Cameron has to defeat the antichrist at Newark Airport during the seven years of tribulation? And this may be uncharitable but I think the reason for so many people spending so much time on this is that it is easy. It is much easier to play end times bingo than it is to change ourselves so that we are prepared for God’s coming. When we focus on all the other stuff it makes it so we don’t have to focus on ourselves and ask the tough questions. Questions like what in me is not glorifying to God, what in me is not prepared for Christ?

We are getting close to Advent, which as you know is a season of preparation. What we are asked to do is what the hymn tells us when it says, “Let every heart, prepare him room.” But it is not just in Advent that we should be preparing a room and asking what in me is not ready for the bridegroom, it should be all the time.

It goes without saying that this has been a weird year but maybe we can end on a high note. Maybe we can end by asking God to show us what in us is not glorifying to him and then asking him to give us the grace to change those things. We can take time to focus on the things that matter, the things that we, through God’s help can do something about so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.