This Sunday, as we move into the end of the year, the scriptures give us three themes; death, waiting, and wisdom. And in this particular time in the story of this community and the story of this country they are remarkably relevant, poignant really, as we mourn the sudden death of two beloved sisters and have been on pins and needles as we awaited the counting of votes in this historic election.

In our second reading Timothy has traveled, probably to Corinth, to update Paul on the state of the Christian community in Thessalonika. He tells Paul that community members, who were waiting for Jesus to appear any day, were concerned because their loved ones were starting to die. They were afraid that their beloved dead might miss the Parousia and that would mean that they had believed in vain.

So, Paul reaches back to the book of Ezra and composes a vivid scenario to comfort those who were concerned. At the second coming of Jesus all faithful Christians, alive and dead will be reunited with each other and with Christ in the clouds. The details of this imaginal composition of Paul have come down to us over the centuries.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is about waiting and wisdom and watchfulness. It would be easy to hear it as a sort of Benjamin Franklin maxim encouraging practical prudence like "Haste makes waste, or "A penny saved is twopence earned," but we can find a deeper wisdom in it.

Weddings in Jesus' time were given by grooms or their fathers and the ten women were to accompany the new couple as the groom brings the bride to his house. There is a delay,
maybe the groom's father was still haggling with the bride's father over the bride price. The waiting gets longer and longer. Five women bring lamps with no oil, perhaps because they did not notice they had none and had no thought of the future. They boldly demand that the wise ones give them some of their oil and so take the risk of running out themselves.

Then the five foolish ones make another mistake. Eleanore Stump asks an interesting question: What if the foolish ones admit their mistake instead of demanding oil from the wise who might be left short? Instead they insist on getting what they want even if it means risk or cost to the others. Oil is needed to keep the lamp of wisdom alight and demanding it from others instead of cultivating their own wisdom is not the way to get it.

Then the foolish ones make another mistake. Eleanore Stump asks an interesting question: What if they hadn't run to the store, but, instead, just waited for the groom, whom we're meant to understand as Jesus. What if Jesus had found them in darkness and humility. Does anyone think that he would have cast them out?

Accepting the love and mercy of Jesus might have put them on the road to wisdom. How many of us have come to some wisdom through admitting our failures and accepting the love and forgiveness of others?

Most of us are not preoccupied with a Second Coming of Jesus, but centuries of focusing on St. Paul's image of meeting Christ and loved ones in the clouds has left us with an other-worldly spirituality that neglects injustice and environmental degradation on the earth. My favorite preacher Bruce Epperly claims that our turning heavenward has often led us to abandon the earth to the forces of evil in government, business and politics.

The heavenly Wedding Feast has begun already, and being part of it means looking beyond our own ego-interests and seeking the flourishing of God's creation, including all of humanity. God is always coming to us here and now, in every minute, and we can keep our
eyes and ears open to God's presence right now. We don't have to wait for an end time to be united to God. The wedding feast is here and we can have a part in making it a celebration where the door is never closed to anybody and the lights of justice, love and solidarity are always on.