

“Keep Your Lamps Burning”

Luke 12:32-40 SCRIPTURE:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Be dressed for action (Gird your loins) and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Does fear of an uncertain future cause you to disregard the needs of others and to stash your possessions in a spirit of greediness?

There is so much to fear: war, terrorism, the economy, global warming, unemployment, hunger, poverty, homelessness, disease and death. It is impossible to escape; walk the neighborhoods, drive the interstates, hear newscasters proclaim the bad news from our TV sets, text crawls at the bottom of our TV screens, updates flash on web browsers, and spam e-mail announce that we are doomed. If we were not afraid before, we are certainly encouraged by our culture to be afraid now. Into that fear, across centuries of human experience, Jesus' teaching offers an extraordinary word of comfort in an increasingly threatening world; “Do not worry about your life”, (V. 22) “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (V.32). God is your father; God's good pleasure is to give the kingdom, a treasure in heaven that is imperishable.

Be dressed for action, “Be like those waiting for their master to return”

This scripture passage, Luke 12:32-40, has two possible meanings. In its narrower sense it refers to the second coming of Jesus Christ; in its wider sense it refers to the time when God's summons enters a person's life, a call to prepare to meet God. Our passing.

There is a praise for the servant who is ready. The long flowing robes of the middle east were a hinderance to work; and when a man prepared to work, he gathered up his robes under his girdle, waistband, to leave himself free for activity. (Let your loins be girded V.35). The type of lamp used was like a cotton wick floating in a sauceboat, or bowl, of oil. Always the wick had to be trimmed and the lamp replenished with oil, or the light would go out. So the good servant needed to be prepared.

No one can tell the day or the hour when eternity will invade time and the summons will come. How, then, would we like God to find us?

We would like him to find us with our work completed. Life for so many of us is filled with loose ends. There are things undone and things half-done; things put off and things not even attempted. Great women and men have always had the sense of a task that must be finished. Jesus himself said, “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:4). No one should ever lightly leave undone a task that ought to have been finished, before night falls.

We would like for God to find us at peace with one another. It would be a haunting thing to pass from this world in bitterness with our neighbor. We should never let the sun go down on our anger, (Ephesians 4:26) least of all the last sun of all and we never know which sun that will be.

We should like God to find us at peace with him. It will make all the difference at the last whether we feel that we are going out to a stranger or an enemy or going to fall asleep in the arms of God.

In the second section of this passage Jesus draws a picture of the wise and the unwise steward. In the middle east the steward had almost unlimited power. He was himself a slave, yet he had control of all the other slaves. A trusted steward ran his master's house for him and managed and supervised his estate.

The unwise steward made two mistakes. He said, I will do what I like while my master is away; he forgot that the day of reckoning must come. We have a habit of dividing life into compartments. There is a part in which we remember that God is present; and then there is the part in which we never think of him at all. We tend to draw a line between sacred and secular; but if we really know what Christianity means we will know that there is no part of life when the master is away. We are working and living forever in our great taskmaster's eye.

He said, I have plenty of time to put things right before the master comes; there is nothing so fatal as to feel that we have plenty of time. Jesus said, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work". (John 9:4).

It is told that one of the most dangerous days of our life is when we discover the word "Tomorrow".

The consistent message throughout this passage is not "Be ready so that you will avoid punishment," but rather, "Be ready so that you will receive blessings." After all those who are ready when the master returns will be the recipients of a heavenly feast. (V. 37-38)

Is there a healthier, more practical, perhaps more faithful understanding of watchful waiting that a sermon from this text can foster? A possible starting point is reconsideration of last week's final question. What does it mean to be "Rich toward God?" In light of two lines from the text for this week: "It is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," and, the describing of the action of the master who returns to find the servant alert, "He will....have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them" (V.32;37)

Being rich toward God is not about putting sizable sums in the offering plate. What Jesus declares, rather, is an orientation toward the whole of life as an abundant gift from a generous God – a gift that can, therefore, be given away with abandon. "Being rich toward God" involves a "generosity of spirit" that opens our perceptions toward manifestations of God's generosity that are always present, but often at the edges of awareness.

Surprise is surely what the master's servants experience when he at last appears and turns their expectations upside down – serving the very one's who have served him. The kingdom for which we are instructed to strive is presented to us, as the banquet is to them, not as compensation or achievement, but as a gift.

PRAYER:

God of compassion and love, you have breathed into us the breath of life. In our frailty we surrender all life to you from whom it came, trusting in your gracious promises and in the hope of the resurrection, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

The less we want to have, the less we need to have. The less we need to have, the less we need to fear. The less we need to fear, the more we know that a life of giving allows us always to live, not on the brink of destruction, but on the brink of blessing, where we can more readily hear the promise that the "Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour," desiring not to punish but to bless. GO IN PEACE