

Nathan Willard  
Preached at North Prospect Union UCC August 10, 2008  
Luke 12:35-48

### **Keeping Watch**

“You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” History is littered with well-meaning but ultimately incorrect prophets who discussed this passage at length in their ministries. Imagine, if you will, that you were a follower of William Miller, a prominent apocalyptic preacher of the 1830s and 40s. He determined that all Jesus meant when he said, “at an hour when you do not expect him,” was the literal hour. The day and month might have been possible. So he estimated the end of the world to be sometime between September 1842 and March 21, 1843. Knowing as you did that the world was going to end and Jesus wanted you to prepare his house, what else could you do but to sell your belongings and then climb on the roof to await his descent from heaven?

But, alas, we are here now, so perhaps we will need to go beyond the plain meaning of the words and delve a little deeper. Jesus clearly intends for us to do SOMETHING, but what might that be? And why is he warning us that we will not know the hour of his return?

Let us begin with the clear elements. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his eventual death and absence from their mortal lives. He sets the stage for their behavior in his absence. The master away at a wedding can safely be assumed to be him, with a warning that he will be gone from the earth and leave no clear schedule for his return. This all sounds familiar to

those who have read their bibles, or at least the Nicene Creed. It is affirmed as part of our Christian beliefs that he will come again, but we have no schedule.

From there, it is slightly less clear, but we still have some hope of understanding the broad strokes. Jesus wants to warn his disciples that it isn't quite enough to be waiting for the master when he returns, if the house is not ready, and then gives two seemingly unrelated examples. The first is that the master, expects his house to be in order and ready for him. He wants neither the fact nor the effects of absent servants to be shown. This seems internally consistent and clear in its allusion. We ought to be ready for his return and keeping watch over his house, whatever those things mean. Fair enough. But then we arrive at the thief in the night? Wait, what? What is this? We have been talking about servants and masters and suddenly we're discussing thieves. And wait again, is Jesus comparing himself to a thief? This change, while interesting, seems to be confusing enough without context that we can lay it aside for a few minutes.

Because, whether we are watching for masters or for thieves, we clearly have the sense that we ought to be keeping watch and preparing our house for a return. But we also have a clear ambiguity about the nature of that return, as well as the explicit warning that we will not know the time of the return. So this question comes to us, what, exactly are we preparing for, and how ought we to prepare?

We have determined that it is NOT appropriate to patiently wait on top of our houses to see the spectacle of the Second coming. So we must look for other ideas. Whenever I think about the second coming, my thoughts turn to the warnings of the street prophets, who say "repent,

repent, the end is nigh.” I think this is a useful place to start. Imagine, if you will, that you are a would-be follower of Christ, perhaps lapsed, but with a healthy fear of the afterlife. You thus find the arguments of the prophets convincing. But is their message the right one? Is it proper that as the end of days approaches, you really ought to repent and save your soul just in time for the final judgment? Is that the sort of preparation that Jesus had in mind?

The blessing and the curse of our shared belief in salvation through faith alone is that we are faced with the temptation of what we might call the Bart Simpson loophole. Simpsons devotees will know that Bart enjoyed a brief career as a faith healer, despite having no particular faith to power his healings. In that episode, he talks with a more pious man, who wonders whether Bart might be interested in living a Christian life. No, Bart says, “I’m opting for a life of sin with a presto-change-o deathbed repentance,” to which the preacher had open admiration for the strength of his logic. Extending this further, you can see some inherent problems in the motivating ability of eternal damnation if it is true that salvation can be had at the end without ill effect. While accidental death is common, people have a tendency to think themselves invincible for most of their lives, and so it is not usually something to plan for. If we can expect that our lives will run to completion without external interruption, this starts to look like a pretty good plan. No worries about tithing, no sitting and listening to the ravings of well-dressed young men in church, go ahead and ignore the panhandler, and you’ll still be set at the end. Perhaps you could give all your money away in your will, after you have finished enjoying it.

But, Jesus was a pretty smart guy. And Jesus also knew that all the folks he criticized for falsely following holy scripture were smart, as well. One of his primary attacks against them, in fact, was that they were too clever by half in following the letter but violating the spirit of the law. So one imagines that he must have anticipated that some the people his message reached, even if they wanted to believe, might be tempted by this letter-of-the-law escape from the consequences of their actions. One starts to see the appeals of the plenary indulgences that helped put us on the path to Protestantism.

The prevalence, though, of such a legitimate abuse of His infinite kindness would certainly work against the plan that Jesus had for life on Earth. While it is true that Jesus wanted to save the everlasting souls of humanity and redeem them in God's eyes, he also deeply understood that the mortal flesh needed as much succor as the eternal soul. In fact, the entire reason they needed redemption in the first place was humanity's horrific abuse of their fellows and the related disrespect of their Creator. Why is it that he directs his rebukes to the rich and powerful, and his tender grace to the downtrodden? The central message in his teachings was and is to make life tolerable for all people. After all, the rich want not for loaves and fish. But, as Jesus perfectly understood, the rich and powerful could EFFECT CHANGE in ways the meek could not. The ministry of Jesus was a ministry in opposition to the base human tendency to leave our fellow man out in the cold. And so he sought to caution those could could make a difference that they were obligated to make a difference in the lives of their fellow men. For him to leave our constant presence without leaving a LASTING reminder that it would be nearly impossible to enter the kingdom of heaven after

treading on the backs of the meek merely through clever manipulation of grace would have been a gross oversight on his part, given his experience with those abusing the Scriptures.

But, as I said, Jesus was a smart guy, and in fact was quite good at finding an answer for just these sorts of temptations to human frailty and weakness. Asking his followers to put their faith in him once, he does so again. Rather than planning to reveal himself to the prophets and hoping they reach us in time for us to remember his sacrifices and teachings just before his judgment, or allowing us to determine through his words the precise date and time of his arrival back on earth, Jesus makes that street prophet saying, “repent” our constant companion by warning us, “you will know not.” He intends us to understand that the deathbed repentance is a false hope and fraught with danger. He could come at any moment, and he had better like what he sees then. Just as locks keep honest men honest, such constant reminders serve as a check against our baser instincts. At the same time, that check will be trying on us all.

Here, too, we have an explanation for the duality of the Thief and the Master. Consider our understanding of his return. To believe the Revelation of St. John at Patmos, his return will come with infinite justice, ending the world as we know it and ushering in a new time. So while our mortal lives will be stolen away, we expect eternal life under the infinite grace of our master. If even this explanation of Jesus as a thief makes you uncomfortable, we can content ourselves with observing that here Jesus does not specifically refer to himself as that thief. Perhaps this thief as the symbol of those wicked ways we seek to keep at bay, those who would steal our humanity from us and turn our hearts from our fellow man. If we have

our whole lives to wait for the Second Coming, we have our whole lives, too, to fight off our the urges to turn our hearts. Who notices the first time they say to themselves, “well, he’ll just go spend it on drugs anyway,” after all?

And so we have arrived at an explanation why Jesus might have decided not to schedule his return, and why it does not behoove us to thinking about his grace as a get-out-of-jail-free card. This still leaves us with a looming and relevant question: What does he want us to do? And why is it that he is so concerned with the Master’s house?

By now, I imagine there can be no doubt in your minds how I answer that question. I alluded earlier to the clear mission of Jesus’s ministry, to make life better for those whom it had been treating poorly. To heal the sick and feed the hungry. Imagine, if you will, the simple analogy of our earth as the home of our Master Jesus Christ, who after coming to purge it of the sin that we had inflicted upon it, has again left it in our keeping. Understand that, in dying, Jesus left us with a new, clean and orderly house. He knew that it would again be beset by thieves, sinners, and the bearers of iniquity. So here is his preparatory admonition: I have cured the sick, I have fed the hungry, I have clothed the poor. I now leave this world in your keeping, and if I come back to find the hungry without bread, the poor without clothes and the sick without medicine, I will be very angry indeed. He knew that, immediately upon his leaving, chaos would again begin to encroach upon his orderly house, and it was up to his followers to keep that chaos at bay.

For the passage in Luke does not end with our reading today. Jesus goes on to say: But if [111](#) that [112](#) slave should say to himself, [113](#) ‘My master is delayed [114](#) in returning,’ and he begins to beat [115](#) the other [116](#) slaves, both men and women, [117](#) and to eat, drink, and get drunk, [12:46](#) then the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not foresee, and will cut him in two, [118](#) and assign him a place with the unfaithful.

Note that he specifically includes the prohibition against striking our fellow man in his admonition to keep careful and good watch on the house. He even seems to suggest that his second coming might be triggered by the continued gross iniquity and abuse of our fellows. Indeed, it seems that we are not only responsible for our own bodies and our own lives, but for the entirety of the earth, the house Jesus gave his life to save. So, what are we to do in order to keep the house ready for its master, who may be coming at any hour, unannounced like a thief in the night? Repent our sins, yes. Express our faith in Him, yes. But most importantly, keep his faith by preparing his earthly home to be a worthy place for him to visit in peace again. Repay his faith in us by expressing his faith in our fellow man.