

Nathan Willard
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The Congregational Church UCC, Iowa City
Luke 12:32-40

Luke 12:32–40 (NRSV)

“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 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.”

Light Your Lamps

It will be a miracle if I make it through this sermon without breaking out crying. As you can see, keeping my emotions in check has never been my strong point. Anyone who knew me growing up would not be surprised by that, and indeed there is a reason a fun game in Divinity School was, "let's look at Nathan and see how he's reacting to this ridiculous things one of our classmates has just said." So, what we're going to do today is have a short sermon. You've earned it, after the past few weeks. I'm going to talk a little bit directly about this scripture, and then we're going to talk about why we're tempted to look at the last bit, which is, indeed, important, but why we need the first bit even more.

So, first, a little bit of background on Luke. Luke, more than the other Synoptic gospels, Mark, Luke and Matthew, has a little bit of a focus on the present moment. Now, this is all throughout the gospel of John—we see Jesus talking about, oh my glory has not yet been revealed, and then the glory is revealed. And this is what's going to go on, this is the kingdom of God. And there's a little bit of talk about what happens afterwards, but John especially has this heavy focus on loving now and living now. And some of that same sensibility comes over into Luke. Not nearly as much--Luke does talk about the coming of the Son of Man, in explicit terms, but he does not put it off, he has this idea that we do not know when it will happen, that it will happen at some point, but that we cannot tell when and so should be ready for it. And that is the way we read this scripture, as we should.

This idea of Jesus coming like a thief in the night permeates Christian tradition, and it is this admonition to always be ready, always be living as if Jesus is about to come. While we dwell on some of the things that to us are anachronistic, we are talking about good slaves in this passage,

we are talking about thieves in the night, still the idea is the same. Whether you are coming in love or not, whether you are someone who is your master, or whether there is someone watching out for whoever else is coming who is not your master, you are ready. You are ready for the good and the bad. And this is indeed an important idea. But in doing that, we sometimes get away from sort of the radical statement of verse 32, our first verse. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."

Today is a hard day for me, and I am glad to have both the exhortations of Isaiah and the reassurance of Luke here for me. As you all now know, wife and kids are heading back to Cullowhee, North Carolina to resume their life there while I stay here with you. To make things worse, they are taking my mother with me. So my best guess is that you will find my father and me at either Blackstone or Short's every night for the next couple of weeks. If you want to say hi, we'll be at the bar having cheeseburgers, so it's not all bad.

This will be the first time I've been separated from my kids for more than a week, and I've largely been a stay at home dad these last three weeks. And it makes my heart grieve for those people, including some in this congregation, and indeed in our own family, who routinely spend months on deployment in the military or civilian services, or, worse yet, those who have lost children and spouses too soon from this world. Which has also happened in this congregation, too many times over. Isaiah's words remind us that showy signs of affection and love are easy. It is living up to the standard those signs show every day that is hard. Gifts and offerings have their place, but when love and kindness are not offered alongside them, the souls of both God and humans starve. And that's how Jesus sees it, too. It's amazing and awe-inspiring to me that he starts his words here by telling us that it is our God's **good pleasure** to give us the kingdom. The kingdom is here, revealed to us in the life and death of Jesus Christ, given to us by God that we may live free from fear. Too long have our hearts been burdened and distracted by the crushing needs of material wealth and status, not through any personal failing of our own, but because it is the way we have been trained to see the world. Too long have we been putting our hearts into our possessions and our work, and not into our souls and bodies.

I was talking to an old friend this week, collaborating on a sermon you'll hear in September. He's a man whose life belongs in a collection of inspirational works somewhere. It was spent helping others, beginning as a farm hand, then repairing barns in New York for farmers too poor to do it themselves. In retirement, he turned to giving medical supplies to doctors in Central America. Now, our sermon is going to take the form of Jeopardy, so pay attention here for points later. This is your freebie. He told me, "ask them, who is the Lord?"

So I ask you, who is the Lord? Where is your treasure? Is it in a vault? Is it in heaven? Is it in this room? Matthew tells us, For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. So look to your right. Look to your left. Whether you are with your loved ones or neighbors, get closer and look. Here are your two or three gathered in Jesus's name, and here is your Lord. Jesus knew that none of us is an island. Jesus knew that it would be hard to give up our fears if we were all alone. It can be so, so scary when we've just got ourselves to talk to about what's going on, what we're hoping what we're planning. So Jesus reminds us that the kingdom is here, and it was God's good pleasure to show it to us. And that Kingdom is here, with our families, with our friends, with all who gather in Christ's name. Seek the kingdom and you will

find it all around you. Light the Lamp of love, and your path will be illuminated. Show love to your family, love to your neighbor, love to your strangers, and love to God, so building your treasure in heaven. Enjoy your work, but love Christ's family.