

³² “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ 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. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

³⁵ “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹ “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. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

The word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

I have a serious confession to make. It's something that I have struggled with for many years, and I want to bear it before you today. I am a

procrastinator of the worst kind. It is something I have observed since I was a high-schooler, up late at night working on that project that was supposed to be completed incrementally throughout the semester. Those who develop personality profiles and other such tools have generously thought up this other way of labeling it as "Pressure-prompted," someone who is prompted to action when the pressure of the deadline has spiked to a new high, but I know that the truth is not as pretty as this sterile, hyphenated term. It doesn't get at the up-all-night, white-knuckled moments when you think, "This is it--this is the time I am not going to make it, I'm going to miss the deadline, I'm going to miss the opportunity, I'm not going to get it into the mail in time, I'm going to be up in front of the congregation with nothing to say..." I can remember one particularly bad night in seminary when at 10 pm I began writing the first of 3 papers that were due the next day.

Living on the edge. It's a stressful way to live.

So it's hard for a person like me to read these parables about preparation, these vignettes by which Jesus admonishes us to get ready, to be prepared. "Be dressed for action, and have your lamps lit," Jesus says. "Be like those who are waiting for their master to return, you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Dr. Alyce McKenzie tells us that this parable, along with several others that Jesus told, is about control--or rather, a lack of control. For Jesus' followers, and for Luke's listeners, it was threatening to be told that the kingdom of God, the reign of God was not and would never be under their

control. Now, thank goodness we modern and post-modern people have no issues about control. Right. As it turns out, we may be more controlling than ever--we take control to new controlling heights. We have pest control, quality control, weight control; disease control, damage control, and cruise control; rent control, self control, and mission control, and the dreaded "control top." And I could go on. I tell my kids all the time, "You are out of control," and I don't mean it in a good way. Control is a highly praised, highly valued asset these days, and it's a basic need for getting along in the world. We even have a margarine called "Take Control." So it's pretty much a slap in the face when Jesus tells these parables that at their deepest roots are meant to confront us with the reality that God's kingdom, God's reign, God's vision that is coming to pass...is 100%, completely and utterly out of our control.

All you can do, Jesus admonishes, is be ready for it. Be ready like these guys who are dressed for action. Their loins were girded, they had tied up their long, flowing robes and cloaks, and made them comfortable for working, for running if necessary. Be ready. But, what exactly does ready look like...and...ready for what?

If you look around these verses in Luke, you'll find the context gives us a clue of what it looks like to be "not ready." Just before today's passage we find Jesus encouraging his audience, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing." He reminds them that God feeds the birds and clothes the grass. So perhaps we are not ready if our life is beset by worries. But I don't think he stops there. Jesus doesn't just

admonish them to stop worrying--he tells them to stop worrying about themselves. He tries to peel them away from being concerned about their most basic needs, much less the more frivolous things in life. This teaching culminates finally in verse 32 to 34: "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." You see, when we are free from worrying about ourselves, when we release control over both the necessary and the unnecessary things of our lives, we are freed up and available to care about someone else. When I realize that I don't need the stuff I have cluttered up--either in my house or in my calendar--then I can give it away, sell it, and give alms to the poor. To strive for the kingdom, to put my treasure in the kingdom, is to enact the trust that God is my portion and my provision, so that God might then use me to provide for another. This is what it means to be ready; this is what it means to be prepared. To have grown and learned to trust in God so much that we are freed from care and worry about ourselves, and freed to care for and love others.

I, along with several of you, have made a dear friend over the last several months. The journey of her life has not been an easy one. She has wrestled as we all do with sin, and with grace. But she found her way here, thanks to the persistent love of friends. And here in these last few months, medical circumstances created big gaps in her life, and suddenly she had great need--for provision, for food, for housing, for transportation. And many of you stepped in. You provided food and helped with a place to live. You

gave rides and you gave a nurse's advice. You loved and you cared. And guess what? In the midst of that, she looked around and said, "So who can I help?" She offered to visit others who were sick and in need. She asked to tell her story, the story of all that she has been given through your love; she wanted to share that out of all that she has been given the thing that means the most is that she now has family. She wanted you to hear her story and be encouraged, to know the God who knows all of your needs, and will provide for them, the God who wants even more to give you the kingdom. This God wants to loosen your grip on those things that you think will keep you safe--your bank account, your knowledge and education, your job, your health, all of these things that we grip onto so tightly because if we let go of them, if we let go of worrying about these things, well...we might just lose control. Can we unclench our fearful hands from the control that we think is our salvation? Could our hands instead be free to grab the hands of those around us and find that we have taken hold of the kingdom?

Being ready for the returning master, being on guard for the thief who is coming is not a call to sit quietly and wait for the knock. This is not like the promise or the threat of atom bomb that drove people to prepare by waiting in shelters with endless supplies of canned food and tang. This is not a call to a still and silent waiting, it's a call to action. It's a call to reset priorities, to get the house in shape--it's about how we spend these "in between times" between Jesus' resurrection and his promised return--it's a call to spend that time preparing, aligning our lives to the truth of the resurrection. It's about learning to recognize glimpses of God's presence, so that we can see it

one day in full. It's about finally asking, "Ok, if I really believe this stuff, THEN WHAT? What must change?"

But all of this...well, even this is not in our control. I mean, I don't know about you, but worry and control don't feel like things I can muscle myself out of. They feel a lot more like shackles for which I have never had the key. And as much as I wish I could understand what to do, how to live, how to prepare myself and the community and the world for the kingdom, the truth is that I don't know. I am left to rely on the promise we were given in pentecost--the promise of the spirit who knows and guides us, who gives us grace for the day, placing opportunities before us and community around us, and the grace and courage we need to step forward. And so we cling to one another and to the means of grace. We practice these ways of opening ourselves to transformation, these ways by which God's spirit massages our hands until they are open, available, ready to be used. By this spirit and the grace we share, through the waters of baptism, our fear is washed away; through shared bread and wine at this table, our hands are opened to receive the kingdom.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Summary: The Parable of the Returning Master reminds us that God's kingdom is out of our control, but by God's spirit we are given the grace to reshape our lives, give up control, and live for others.