

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 12:35-59

"Ready Or Not"

As Jesus prepares his disciples for the troubles that lie just ahead of them in Jerusalem, he has told them to be faithful to him, to find their security in the Father who loves them, and not to worry because the Spirit will be with them. But in all this, Jesus also weaves in the warning that these troubles are just a foretaste - the first signs - of the "great troubles" that will soon come on Israel as a nation, and on all people when *"the Son of Man comes."* So what they learn to do now will also prefigure how they will endure, or not, the day when Judgment comes. Jesus of course knows, as they do not, that his Passion marks the beginning of "the Last Days."

For us, the passage of two millennia has of course greatly dimmed our anticipation of the "coming of the Son of Man," the Resurrection, and the Judgment. Many skeptical scholars have dismissed all such ideas as "1st century errors," asserting that even Jesus was confused, believing that after his Ascension he would soon return in glory! Many churches have abandoned all teaching on "the End Times." I remember that after being brought up in an Anglican church where it was never mentioned, how astonished I was to encounter Christians for whom the Second Coming of Jesus was a live issue. But I quickly learned that there it is, all through the New Testament, and that you cannot understand Jesus' teachings unless

you keep his "eschatological" perspective in mind.

It is clear that what scholars call the *"already/not yet"* aspects of Christianity are woven throughout the New Testament. So as we read Jesus' warnings here, we have to try to grasp their near-term and long-term meanings. What does it mean to live in the "in-between times" when Jesus has inaugurated "the kingdom of God," but its fulfillment still lies ahead?

1) *Be Ready*

The key concept is, of course, *"be ready."* So Jesus calls on metaphors for living like *"be dressed;"* literally "gird up your loins" - tuck your long robe into your belt so your feet are ready to move! *"Keep your lamps burning"* - you are called to action, to push back the world's darkness. Jesus' 1st century disciples must remain faithful and not retreat in the face of opposition and persecution, especially when Jesus is arrested, tried and executed! All followers of Jesus must remain faithful no matter what unexpected difficulties come into their lives.

Casting this in future terms, Jesus says it will be good for those servants whom the Master finds alert and active when he returns unexpectedly. He will in fact then honor them in a way that up-ends their social expectations, as he himself serves them food at "the great banquet" that he is preparing

for his faithful people! They must be ready, because the Master's return will be *unexpected*. Indeed it may seem to them that his return is long *delayed*, so the "stewards" among them who are supposed to manage the Master's estate may become lazy, abuse the servants, and eat and drink themselves into a stupor. The Master will of course punish them severely!

2) *To Whom Much is Given...*

In these warnings, we run into a principle that ought to sink deep into us. When it comes to Judgment, what people knew and what people had will be taken into account. Those who knew what they should do but chose not to do it will be treated differently from those who did not know. Those who were given much will be treated differently from those who were given little.

For Christians today who cling to the fact that Jesus "saves us by grace," these are very challenging ideas! They ought at least to remind us that not everyone is equally culpable in this life; that some do not know what they are doing (as Jesus acknowledged from the cross); that some have privileges that ought to make them at the very least more grateful for the grace they have received. Perhaps there is a hint here of how God views those who know very little of his grace or of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we who have been "saturated" in the gospel for centuries will be held more deeply responsible for our unbelief, or for our lack of faithfulness to our Christian calling.

But there it is: "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*" That has to be true now, in this "in-between life," as well as at the final Judgment. So when we ask what it means to live faithfully in hard times, or to

be always alert and ready to serve, or to be good stewards of the gifts and materials and responsibilities and people that God has graciously given us – when we look at what it means to live as a Christian, it must depend on what we have been given.

Some people are given so little that we have great responsibility to care for them – to "*feed them at the proper time.*" Some of us have been given so much that we risk the fate of the steward who thought the Master was gone so long that he could get away with beating the servants and drinking all the Master's wine. "*To whom much is given, much will be required.*"

3) *Living In Crisis*

How should Christians live in hard times, or in crisis? Stay alert, be ready. Know our Master's will and do it. Bear our special responsibilities well as a good stewards of what has been entrusted to *us*. By implication, do not compare ourselves to other people: we cannot know what God has given them in gifts or burdens, or how much knowledge they have. They will have to answer for themselves; you and I must answer for what we have done with what God has given us.

In all this remember that a loving Father is pleased to share his kingdom with people who will believe and obey. Jesus brought "*good news to the poor*" – the marginalized, the people of no status or wealth or education or power, and "*the poor heard Jesus gladly.*" So he gathered around him an initially a rag-tag group of people who were despised by the rich, the powerful and the religious, and Jesus offered and still offers membership of that community – the people of God, now called the Church of Jesus Christ – to anyone who is willing to entrust themselves to Jesus as Lord.

We can, in other words, already enter “the kingdom of God” in this in-between time through faith in Jesus; we can become part of God’s family by adoption. *“It is the Father’s pleasure to give us the kingdom,”* and it is a gift, and not something we earn. But the kingdom has its own standards – of status, of behavior – and those who come into it are expected to be loyal, to be faithful, to be active, to be wise, to be ready to do the Father’s will.

How “ready” are we? For what? Are we prepared for faithful Christian living when things get hard? You and I know that when the pressure is on, it is very easy to let our discipleship slip. We feel stressed, even overwhelmed, and our faith and its practices ebb away. We stop reading our Bibles (“too much else on my mind”), we don’t pray (except for “help me, God”), we stop attending worship (we’re too busy”), we don’t give time or money to the church or anyone else (“we just don’t have a penny to spare right now”).

Our language gets spiky, we become irritable, we let out curses that “in normal times” we would never use. We eat, drink and smoke too much. Instead of being faithful to our Master, we become obsessed with ourselves. It can all be pretty ugly, and none of us are immune to those kinds of responses. We especially don’t react well to issues like delay, division, and opposition. We may even find that we are being “beaten” by people who are supposed to be “stewards” of God’s gifts to us – people in positions of responsibility who are abusing it. Have you ever had a boss who managed by anger and put-downs? How did you handle that? Have you lived with a spouse or parent who was constantly verbally abusive? How did you handle that?

Are we aware of what it means for us to be “faithful Christians” *in our particular circumstances*? It will differ for all of us – our

gifts and temperaments differ, our pressures vary, our callings differ, our knowledge varies. What does God want of us? We need to figure this out – it’s no good just trying to copy what someone else does, although of course there are people who are great examples, and there are things we are all called to do, no matter what. But we are unique. Are we among the people to whom *“much has been given”*? If so, what does God call us to do with that?

If we are in *troubles with God*, we ought certainly to use our time now to get right with him. *“Settle out of court”* is Jesus’ advice! Be reconciled while you can. At this moment, it is possible to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ – by trusting ourselves and our futures and our reputations and our failings and our families and our hopes to him; saying “Lord, I believe you came to redeem all these things, and I am so far in debt on them that I can never get them back into the black again. Forgive me, help me, and by your grace bring me into the family of God where your Spirit can assist my life.” Do it now, says Jesus, while you can.

But realize that being part of the family of God, part of the kingdom of God, will reprioritize some social connections that we have assumed were essential parts of our life. Our ethnicity, our nationality, our education, our standing, even our family, will now in many ways be irrelevant compared to our membership in his family, his kingdom. The first call on our life now will be loyalty to his kingdom and fidelity to him – especially when times are hard.

Are we ready for that? Then we are welcome to join “the people of God.” Come in from the cold; he will feed you, give you shelter, give you work.

Let us pray...