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August 11, 2019

"Have Your Lamps Lit" – Luke 12:32-40 & Isaiah 1:1,10-20

Let us pray: Lord, we ask that these words that were spoken so many centuries ago, may speak to us today. Open our ears, open our minds, and open our hearts so we may hear your will for our lives, and that your name may be praised. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.

There is an old story of a man who accidentally slipped and fell of a cliff. On the way down, he grabbed hold of the branch of a tree and remained suspended there. He started praying as he had never prayed before:

"Lord, save me! Please Lord!" Suddenly the Lord answered, "Yes?" The man pleaded, "Save me, Lord!" "Have you attended Church?" asked the Lord. "Yes, I did whenever I could, but I promise never to miss if You will save me."

"Have you kept the ten commandments?" "Yes, as much as I could. I promise to obey them to the letter if You will save me." "Have you said your prayers every day?" "Yes, Lord, but just get me off the side of this cliff and I'll be the best praying man in the world."

Have you given generously to the work of my Church?" "Yes, I think I have, but I'll give even more generously in the future. Just get me off the side of this cliff." "Do you trust me?" "Yes, Lord, of course I trust you – completely." "Then let go of the branch."

There is a long pause. The man looks down at the 200 feet drop and the raging river below...takes a deep breath...and yells back, "Is there anyone else up there?" You have to let go of the man-made crutches you hold onto and trust me says the Lord.

Replace them with a tight grip on God and that is not always easy to do. From the moment we are born and until we leave this earth, our lives are filled with anxiety. A baby comes into the light frightened and hungry.

And as much as we hope to die peacefully in our sleep, even death will be a traumatic experience. I think it will be like a new birth into a new existence. But it will not come easily for any of us. In a world filled with anxiety over wealth and survival, Jesus uses images of a father whose primary concern is the welfare of his children.

The people of Jesus' day, like us, felt vulnerable and out of control. As a result, they resorted to worshipping a God that would give them material things. Today's readings cause us to step back for a moment and consider God in another light, as one who is beyond the material.

In the passage from Isaiah, God calls the people of Israel "the people of Sodom and Gomorrah," because they have allowed material things such as incense and sacrifices of animals to become more important than their relationship with God.

God wants the relationship to be centered on justice and care for orphans, not expensive feasts and liturgies. God commands the people to "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

The quality here is not material, but a spirituality that deeply honors a God who cares passionately for the whole of creation and doesn't need to be appeased with sacrifice when things are going badly. It's not about God; it's about us. And God expects us to address the things that are amiss, not fix them through incantations or religious rituals.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus addresses this issue of how we are to live with God: "Do not be afraid, 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. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Despite Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inspiring words, we're pretty sure we have more to fear than fear itself, right? We fear what we can't see, what we don't know. We fear losing control of our lives, making ourselves vulnerable to someone else. We fear getting hurt. We fear what others might think of us. We fear shame.

We may try to escape our fear by ignoring it, or by building elaborate fantasies to hide from it. We may even try to escape our fear by "drowning our sorrows" or "getting high." We may try to stockpile comfort to offset our fear. Maybe we overeat.

Maybe we seek attention, even if it's negative attention. Have you ever heard of "the law of the soggy potato chip?" Back in the late 70s, Psychologist Fitzhugh Dodson wrote a parenting book called, *How to Discipline With Love* (1977).

His premise for the Law of the Soggy Potato Chip was that children would rather have negative attention than no attention at all, just as children would rather have a soggy potato chip than no potato chip at all.

But potato chips won't get it, no matter how crisp they are. None of these things will take away our fear. Yet Jesus says, "Stop being afraid." Just stop it. *Fear* motivated the rich farmer from last week to stockpile all his goods.

He was willing to tear down all his barns right before harvest, in order to build bigger barns to keep all his stuff for himself, remember? It's easy to call him a fool, since Jesus did, but are we any better?

As I celebrated another birthday, I realize that I have more years behind me than I have ahead, so I decided to start "purging" my belongings so, my sons won't have to worry about my stuff when I am no longer here.

At first, I carefully selected items that I thought might have value to someone else, so I took those items to Goodwill. Let me tell you, it was not easy to make the decision of what to keep and what to give away. I agonized over an old comforter that everyone admired, but after washing it several times, it began to fall apart.

I stitched it many times in several places until I realized that it was time to give it up. And much to my surprise, I noticed that it gets easier and easier to let go of stuff once you decide to let go. Now I wonder why I didn't do it sooner.

And we wonder how we managed to accumulate so much stuff in the first place. Are we afraid we might need something and not be able to get it when we need it? Yet Jesus says, "Your Father in Heaven knows what you need." And Jesus also says:

Store up treasure in heaven; Get rid of your fear; Get rid of your need to be in control; Get rid of your stuff; Instead, deposit your treasure into the bank of the Holy Spirit. Your treasure is the Kingdom of God, which he has already decided it is his pleasure to give you.

What stands at the core of this Good News is not the fear of shame, but God's amazingly tender concern for us, his own little flock. This is an invitation to trust that our future rests in the gracious promises and presence of God. The Gospel invites us to put first things first.

The Gospel says, "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." Because, it was *God's good pleasure* to give you the Kingdom in the first place. Since God, in his own good pleasure, has already given us the Kingdom, we are called to be prepared for its fulfillment when Christ comes again.

While Jesus is certainly talking about the end of time, when he will come again in glory to reign over a new heaven and a new earth, we should

not be distracted by attempts to pinpoint the day and the hour this will happen. We should also not be lulled into passively twiddling our thumbs while we wait for Jesus to return.

Luke offers the certainty that Christ will come again, and the uncertainty of when that will be. This certain uncertainty focuses on the point of this passage: instead of twiddling our thumbs – or, at the other extreme, living wildly – because the end is near, we need to be faithful and alert.

Stop being afraid. Invest in the heavenly treasure of God's kingdom, and, be ready for Christ to return. "Being ready for Jesus' coming is less about any actual time and place and more about imagining Jesus' activity in the world, when and where you least expect it or imagine seeing it. Have your lamps lit.

In other words, waiting around, waiting for instructions is not going to cut it. Being without fear, knowing the sources of your treasure – that is, your identity, your worth as a child of God – makes it possible to be prepared for full participation in God's Kingdom."

In this passage, the focus is not so much on the end *times* as on the end *ways*. The consistent message throughout the passage is not "be ready so that you will avoid punishment," but rather, "be ready so that you will receive blessing."

As a child, one of the games I often played was hide-and-seek. You remember that game, don't you? Sure, you do. The object of the game was simple; you hide, and someone find you. Of course, the game itself almost always turned out the same way.

The person doing the seeking would close his or her eyes, and then everyone would scramble around the area looking for the best place to hide. And then you would hear those impatient words of the person waiting for you to hide: "Are you ready yet?" "No!" we would say. "Not yet!"

The person doing the seeking would eventually declare, "Ready or not, here I come!" you knew your time was up. You were either ready or you weren't. In the Kingdom of God, your greatest treasures are in heaven, not on earth. Jesus then goes onto say, "Don't worry, then, about what you have or what you need.

I mean, look at the birds of the air. They don't sit around worrying about things all day, and yet God provides for them! So, I am telling you now, don't worry about the things of the world; it won't do you any good.

So, when Jesus says, "Be dressed for action!" he is saying, "Free yourself for working with me!" Make yourself ready, for I am coming. Nothing. No insurance, no bank, no hiding place can save us from the time of trial. You need to be ready.

Do not be afraid, but be dressed for action for blessed are those whom the master find alert when he comes but know this: if the owner of the house had known what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

So, the Lord asks us today: "Do you trust me? We reply prayerfully, "Yes, Lord we trust you." Then let go and have your lamps lit. Be ready when He comes. Amen.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, we thank you for preparing a heavenly city for those who put their faith in your promises, for those giving away their riches on earth and for treasuring heaven in our hearts. Amen.