

Luke 12:32-40, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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A story is told about a court jester back in the days of damsels, knights, and chivalry. This jester was a particular favorite of the king. The king loved his jokes and his antics so much that he gave him a scepter and told him that if he ever found someone more foolish than himself, he should give that person the scepter.

Sometime later, the king became very ill, and his jester went to visit him. The king said to him, "I fear that I am about to embark on a long journey."

"When will your majesty return?" asked the jester, "In a month?"

"No," the king replied.

"In a year?"

"No, my beloved jester, I am never going to return."

"Well then, what preparations has your majesty made for your journey?" asked the jester.

"None," replied the king sadly.

"Your majesty is going away forever and he has made no preparations for his journey?" The jester shook his head and handed his scepter to the king. "Please take this," he said, "for I would never do such a foolish thing."

We can look at today's scripture readings from two perspectives. The first is from the point of view of the long journey that we'll all be going on one day. No matter how strong and healthy we may be today, the day will come when we'll leave this life. And not one of us knows when that day will be. So the first step is simply to acknowledge that we *all* have that journey ahead of us.

The second perspective that the gospel reading gives us has to do with a different journey: Jesus' return. We know that he'll come back to this earth one day before the final judgment. We don't know whether that will be in our own lifetimes, or decades or centuries from now. But if we aren't still around at the time of the second coming, we'll meet Jesus when we depart this life, and Jesus warns us to be ready. It can come at a time we don't expect. Even if we live to old age, if we haven't put our lives in order spiritually, we may find we've left it too late.

Jesus likens the unexpectedness of his return to a thief breaking into a house in the night. If the owner had known the thief was coming, he would have stayed up and caught the burglar out. I remember many years ago a house being broken into in my home town, a few miles from where I lived. The thieves took the TV and the VCR, as it was back then, as the most valuable items. Then about two weeks later they hit the same house again, taking the replacement items that the homeowners had bought. If the owner could have known that the thieves were coming, he would have been ready to catch them.

So we need to keep constant watch – to always be ready.

During the time of Jesus' ministry on earth, he often used the imagery of a master going away and returning. His listeners would take that to mean what they saw as God's departure at the time of the exile, and the long-awaited day of God's return. The people of Israel expected that day to be a day of judgment, and the final establishment of God's kingdom.

Our gospel passage contains one of these parables. A master goes on a trip to a wedding, and tells his servants to be dressed and ready when he returns. Jesus goes on to say that the servants who are awake, alert and ready to receive him, are the ones who are blessed by his arrival. Their master even sits them down at the banquet table and serves them.

The point is simple: like the master returning from the wedding, Jesus could return at any moment. Like the thief in the night, we don't know when it will be. Because we don't know, we have to keep a constant vigil. In the same way we must *always* be prepared for Hebrews 11:1-3, Jesus' return. And that means constantly striving to live the way he taught us to live.

That sounds hard, doesn't it? *Can* we be on high alert all the time? How do we do that? First, by examining our faith. The reading from Hebrews describes Abraham being called by God to set out on a journey "for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8) Abraham trusted that God would lead him to the right place, and look after him on the journey. Abraham's faith was strong enough to overcome the fact that he didn't know where the journey would take him, or what awaited him there. We know that our final destination is heaven, and that it will be a glorious place, but we don't know exactly what it will be like; and still less do *we* know what awaits us on our way there as we go through this life. All we can do is to put our trust in God.

Once we're sure of our faith, we need to look very carefully and honestly at the kind of life we're living. Is it a lifestyle that honors God? Are we being the kind of people God calls us to be? Or are we overly influenced by the corrupt values of the world? Do we put on a show of religion while living a purely secular life?

I've heard people say, "I know God will always forgive me, so for now, I'm going to do what I want. Some day I'll repent, and then God will forgive me and I'll live a holier life." But what happens if Jesus returns before then? It could be five thousand years or five minutes. Or we could be like the foolish man that we heard about last week, who built up vast wealth for himself, only to die suddenly and lose it all.

When we get our faith and our lifestyle in order, we shift our focus away from *earthly* treasures, and concentrate instead on *eternal* treasure, which is what Jesus teaches us to do. The final step in preparing for the "long journey" ahead is simply to live in confidence of where we're going. Jesus urges us to focus on "an unchanging treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys." (Luke 12:33)

But what if we're still not sure we *have* that treasure that Jesus is talking about? What if, despite all the promises we've heard from Jesus over the years, we're still not confident of our place in heaven? What if we can't stop ourselves being afraid of what's coming next, because we don't believe we've done enough to deserve eternal life in God's loving presence?

If you have any doubts along those lines, then the opening words of our gospel are for you. Jesus says to us all: "Do *not* be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's *good pleasure* to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32)

We don't *have* to earn our place in heaven; God has already prepared our rooms there. When Jesus set us free through his death on the cross, he offered the gift of eternal life to every person who chooses to receive it. When we open our hearts to God, God joyfully opens the gates of the kingdom to us.

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:34) Our treasure is in heaven but it enriches our lives even while we're still in this world.