



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## Be Ready

**Luke 12:35-48**

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Advent 3

About ten years ago Veronica, Alexandra, and I headed off on a trip to Kelowna to visit family. We'd packed quickly the night before and then on Sunday, after church, we left in a hurry straight for Kelowna. We were living in Vancouver, Washington at the time and had been on the road about two hours. We were just entering Olympia, when I had one of those "Oh no!" moments. I remembered I hadn't packed our passports. I look at Veronica and asked if she had remembered to pack them. She looked at me with the "That's your job" look. Even still she checked her purse just in case she had remembered them the night before and then forgotten that she's remembered. They weren't there. I didn't want to go back home. It was an eight- or nine-hour trip at it was and going home would add four hours. For a minute I considered just keeping on and playing dumb at the border, but if that didn't work, then we'd have wasted not four hours, but eight or nine. So we turned around and went back for the passports. I felt like an idiot. I remembered being a Boy Scout and our motto: Be prepared. I dropped out of Boy Scouts after a year.

"Be prepared" is the message of Advent. It's also the message of our text this morning from St. Luke's Gospel. When you set out on a journey you've got to be prepared. There are things you can live without. But there are other things, like passports, that will bring your journey to a sudden and disappointing stop if you forget them. As we've seen in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is on a journey.

He's on his way to Jerusalem. It doesn't seem that he knew exactly how things would unfold when he got there, but he knew that going to Jerusalem—going to Zion—was going to be the focal point of his ministry of redemption and that it would somehow involve his suffering and death at the hands of the religious leaders of his people. He understood that he was fulfilling the mission and ministry of Daniel's Son of Man and of Isaiah's suffering servant. The journey wasn't an easy one for him, but along the way he was calling his disciples and calling the people to follow him and he knew it wouldn't be an easy journey for them either. And so in 12:35 he says:

**"Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning..."** (RSV)

"Let your loins be girded". What does that mean? A lot of modern translations, including the ESV, try to make it simple by translating Luke to say "be ready" or "dress for action", but in doing that they obscure Jesus' point. There's another important place in the Bible where the Lord told his people to gird their loins—to hitch up their long robes so that they'd be ready to leave quickly. It was in the instructions he gave to Moses for the celebration of the Passover, held on the night before the exodus from Egypt. God was leading his people on a journey of deliverance and redemption. As they ate that meal they were to be ready to go. This follows Jesus' warning at the beginning of Chapter 12: "Beware the leaven of the Pharisees". That's another Passover reference. The Lord told Moses that the people were to bake bread without leaven. That's what they ate with their loins girded—as they readied themselves to follow the Lord as he led them out of slavery. Now again Jesus is leading his people on a journey: Beware the leaven of the Pharisees...let your loins be girded. Jesus is leading a new exodus, not this time from captivity in Egypt, but from a much greater captivity: captivity to sin and death. That journey is going

to take Jesus and his disciples through the wilderness, but if they're prepared, if they allow themselves to be equipped by Jesus, he will lead them to a new life. There's a sense of urgency. The ancient Israelites had eaten the first Passover meal not knowing what to expect. It was their salvation. If they didn't participate—if they weren't ready—the angel of death visited them just as he visited the Egyptians and killed their firstborn. The journey is good news, but there's also a warning that comes with it. The end of the journey comes when the Son of Man fulfills his mission. Jesus tells the people that if they're prepared, the Son of Man will bring life; but if they're not prepared the Son of Man brings judgement and death. The bad news is the Pharisees and Israel in general weren't ready. The leaven of the Pharisees left them with nothing more than a false veneer of piety and of righteousness. And now Jesus points to Israel being unprepared to follow—unprepared for the return of the Lord when he comes to Zion in judgement. But, of course, the good news is that Jesus has come to call the people to purge their lives of leaven and to hitch up their robes. If they will follow him in faith, they'll be ready when the Lord comes. The parables Jesus tells next show these two sides of his mission. Look at verses 36-38:

**"[B]e like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!"**

Imagine a rich man's house. A rich man in ancient Jewish or Roman society would have had a house full of slave. He was the master. He ruled

the house. His word was law. If a slave disobeyed or was unprepared to fulfil his duties the master had every right to have him beaten. This was an image the people could understand. There were probably slaves in the crowd that day who lived in just that kind of situation.

Now imagine the slaves, home at night while their master is out making merry at a wedding feast. They have no idea how long the festivities will last. They have no idea when their master will be home. But they do know that when he does get home he'll expect that them to be prepared. There very easily could have been a slave there that day who had been beaten because his master came home late one night and found him asleep. Everyone understood Jesus' words that "Blessed are the servants whom the master finds awake when he comes." That was the way of the world in those days. And yet Jesus now shows them a totally different economy—he turns the whole world upside down. Blessed are the servants who are awake when the master comes—not because they won't be beaten for dereliction of their duties, but because the master will reward them for their faithfulness. Because they were faithful in their duties—because they were prepared for his return—he will put on the clothes of a slave himself and serve his own servants as they recline at his table.

This is the culmination of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. The prophets wrote of the days of the Messiah as the time in which every man would have his own vine and his own fig tree. They were to be days in which wine was so plentiful that people would wash their clothes in it and grapevines so plentiful that a man would tether his horse to one and not have to worry about the horse eating all the grapes. Because of prophecies like these the Jews talked about their future hope in terms of a great banquet on the day

when the Lord would come and set everything to rights. And now Jesus draws on that imagery of the banquet. That's what he's come to bring. He's the master returning home late at night and if his servants are faithful—even waiting up for him until to the second or third watch—until midnight or even just before dawn—he will reward them by serving them himself.

This is precisely what Jesus did in the Incarnation we're preparing to celebrate. Think of St. Paul's words in Philippians 2:5-8 where he describes the way in which Jesus, the master of the parable, humbled himself and became a servant to his own servants.

**Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**

Consider the Last Supper, that last night Jesus had with his disciples before he was arrested. Consider what he did as they entered the room: he, the master, wrapped a towel around his waist like a servant and washed the feet of his disciples. At dinner he passed them the bread and the wine as signs and symbols of his own body of blood, soon to be given as a sacrifice for their sins. In Jesus the master humbles himself and gives his own life in order to lead his servants in an exodus from their bondage to sin and death. Brothers and sisters, this is the Good News. But there's also a warning here: the servants who are asleep when the master returns, the servants who have not been steadfast in faith, the servants who have turned aside from the hard path the master has called them to walk miss out on the master's banquet—they miss out

on the exodus and remain in their bondage. It's easy to be tempted to turn aside. Jesus' path is a hard one to follow. It's tempting to take the easy way out—to eat, to drink, and to be merry today. It's tempting to fear and to worry about what we're going to eat or what we're going to wear or even what might happen to us in the face of persecution. But as we've made our way through Chapter 12, Jesus reminds his friends that the Father never ceases to watch over them and that the Father has promised them a share in the kingdom Jesus came to establish. They need only strive after him.

In verses 39 and 40 Jesus gives a second image that calls his disciples to be ready.

**But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."**

We've still got the imagery of the household, but this time it's not the slaves awaiting the return of their master, but the master anticipating the coming of a thief. The problem, of course, is that no one knows when a thief might break into the house. When it happens we kick ourselves: If only I'd been there! If only I'd locked the door before I went out! If only I'd asked my neighbour to keep an eye on things while I was away!

What Jesus is getting at here is that a time was coming when the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah would be fulfilled. The showdown between light and darkness was coming—the day promised by the Lord all the way back on the day when Adam and Eve had sinned. The seed of the woman was coming to crush the head of the serpent. On the way there the serpent was going to bruise his heel. There was going to be a

showdown. Jesus would ultimately win, but not before he himself suffered and died. Jesus envisioned the Lord coming to Zion to judge Israel and he saw a great catastrophe coming to Jerusalem and to Israel. And he didn't see this as some far-off event in the future. No, it was something that was going to happen in the lifetime of his disciples—"this generation will not pass away until all has taken place," he says in Luke 21:32. And while all of this was most certainly coming, no one knew the day or the hour. Jesus had some sense of it. He knew this was his last trip to Jerusalem. But not even he knew exactly how it was going to play out. The great showdown, the great judgement was coming like a thief in the night. And so he calls his friends to be prepared.

At this point Peter breaks in. He doesn't fully understand and he's not sure exactly whom Jesus is addressing here.

**Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?"** (Luke 12:41)

"Is this for us—for your friends and disciples? Or does this apply to the whole crowd here? For all of Israel?" His question would have been a natural one. For the Jews, stories and parables about masters and servants were usually about God and Israel. God was the master; Israel was the servant. When Jesus talks about the master coming home to his servants, Peter wants to know if Jesus is talking about the Lord coming to this little group of disciples or is he talking about the Lord returning to Israel as a whole. Jesus responds with another parable that basically answers with a frustrating and nebulous "Yes" as his answer.

In verses 42-48 Jesus uses the image of master and slave again. And, again, the master is away from the house. He entrusts the care of his slaves to an overseer. And this kind of situation can play out three different ways.

**And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.**

The overseer or manager who is rewarded at the master's return is the one who is faithful with what the master has entrusted to him. The master in this parable has been generous. He's made sure to provide for his slaves and the faithful manager knows this. He's liberal with the master's provision and makes sure the slaves are cared for while the master is away. It doesn't matter when the master returns, because this manager has been faithful and consistently so. This is an exhortation to Jesus' disciples to be faithful servants—to follow Jesus, even when things get difficult and even when they fear for their own lives. It's a call to share the Good News of God's generosity and graciousness with the nations that they might share in his blessing too. And it's also a call to the shepherds of Israel—to the scribes and lawyers and priests whom God entrusted with the

oversight of his people and who have failed as managers. Jesus calls them back to faithfulness.

And then he warns them. The parable can play out a different way—and this is precisely how it has played out with Israel. The master went away and his managers took the good things set aside for the slaves and made merry themselves. Instead of looking after the master's slaves they beat them. When the master sent his prophets to warn and to correct them they killed those prophets. Now the master is sending his own son and the managers will kill him too. The temple was meant to be the place of God's presence amongst his people, but in his absence it became the centre of a corrupt priesthood—of managers who abused the people, who led them astray, and who kept the good things of God for themselves. And yet it's not just the religious leaders who did this. Israel as a whole forgot her calling. Instead of taking her light to the nations, she kept it to herself, hid it under a basket, and condemned the nations for being lost in darkness. Jesus warns that when the master returns there will be hell to pay. He describes those who knew the master's will and deliberately ignored it as facing the prospect of being cut in two. Whether Jesus means that literally or figuratively, it points to a nasty judgement. And Jesus' point is that while no one knows precisely when this will happen, it *will* happen—again, before this generation passes away. Even those who have rejected the master's will because they were ignorant face judgement, even if their judgement isn't as severe. It's a warning: Turn aside from sin, repent, and be faithful to the Lord's calling—and if you don't know what that calling is, seek it out! The God of Israel is returning to Zion and his servants must be ready. Jesus led the faithful to life while the Lord brought the Romans in judgement to destroy the city, to scatter the people, and to destroy the temple.

In verse 41 Peter asked if this was directed at the disciples or at the whole crowd or at all of Israel. Jesus' answer was "Yes". We might ask if Jesus' exhortation and warnings are meant for us. Many Christians have assumed that what Jesus was talking about here is his coming at the end of history. But that doesn't really fit. We'll see why as the story unfolds in the verses and chapters that follow. Jesus was describing and warning the people about what was going to happen when he arrived in Jerusalem, about his death and resurrection, and about the judgement that would come a generation later when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. In these verses he was very much talking to "them"—to people who lived two thousand years ago and he was talking about events that took place two thousand years ago. And yet, brothers and sisters, those events set the stage for the events for which you and I are now waiting.

Think about it in terms of the season of Advent. During this season of the Church Year we recall the First Advent, the First Coming of Jesus in a way that points us to his future Second Advent. We remember Jesus coming to inaugurate his kingdom and look forward to its full coming at his return. And in this sense the faithfulness to which Jesus called his disciples as they prepared for those events two thousand years ago are a call to us to be faithful and to be prepared as we await his return. The Lord is generous. He is full of grace and mercy. And yet his call to enter his kingdom is a call to leave behind our old ways, to leave behind our sin, to turn away from our old sources of security and, instead, to follow Jesus as he leads us through the wilderness to the New Jerusalem. It's not an easy journey to make. We've grown to love our sins. We've grown to love the things of this worldly kingdom that is passing away. We've found security in our money, in our jobs, in

our possessions, in Caesar's kingdom and it's not always easy to let go of those things and instead to simply trust and follow Jesus and his promise to care for us. The Israelites may have been slave in Egypt, their lives may have been awful, but Egypt was a known evil. The wilderness was scary and unknown. But as they followed in faith, the Lord led them to the promised land. The persecution the disciples encountered on the road to Jerusalem, the events surrounding Jesus death, and the opposition and even martyrdom they faced at the hands of the Jews in the early days of the Church were frightening, but they had seen Jesus raised from the dead. They knew his promises were true. They had an eternal hope that even death could not destroy. And, friends, the same goes for us. We too follow Jesus through trials and tribulations, through pain and sorrow, not knowing when or how he will return, but confident in faith knowing that he holds out to us an offer of life. As we follow him on this exodus from sin and death let us be prepared as the Israelites were in their exodus and as the disciples were as they follow Jesus to Jerusalem, that when our Lord does return to judge the living and the dead we might hear those words: Well done, good and faithful servants.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare the way for you, grant that the ministers and stewards of your truth may so make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.