

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Preaching on the end times is difficult and can even be frightening. Some churches do it all the time, trying to terrify people into joining their church. It's just a new iteration of the frontier church's "anxious bench" to try to gain converts. As Lutherans, we believe it's the Gospel that converts people, not the Law; it's not fear but the comfort and joy that comes from knowing that our salvation is secure through faith in Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, consider how we just sang about that day that is drawing near. When Jesus comes again as judge—and He will as we just confessed: "And He will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead"—when Jesus in "power shall appear as judge whom God appointed, Then fright shall banish idle mirth, And flames on flames shall ravage earth." "Woe to those who scorned the Lord," we sang, "with shame and trembling they will stand and at the judge's stern command to Satan be delivered." That can be a bit unnerving.

And in some ways, it's understandable. The prophet Zephaniah speaks of *"the great day of the Lord,"* a day of judgment against Judah, and He calls it a *"day of wrath ... a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements."*

You might remember that Jesus as judge was the image that was prevalent in Luther's day, and that preaching tormented Luther. It caused Him to hate the phrase, *"the righteousness of God,"* for he knew that the just judge had to punish his sins. But that was before Luther had come to know the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, for Jesus was not sent *"into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* For remember, this is the way God *"loved the world, that he gave his only Son,"* into our flesh, lifted up on a cross, crucified unto death, *"that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:17, 16).

In this section of Scripture from the Gospel of John, Jesus goes on to describe the judgment as a contrast between the light and darkness. *"Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light,"* Jesus says, *"lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God"* (John 3:20-21).

In our Epistle, St. Paul reminds us that we *"are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness."* Thus, although the day and hour of Jesus' return are unknown, although His return will be as unexpected as *"a thief in the night,"* we will not be caught unawares for that day to surprise or

frighten us, for we are of the day, awake and sober and walking as children of light (Eph. 5:8), that is, we are wearing *“the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.”*

Thus arrayed, not in fear, but in faith and love and hope, do we hear Jesus tell us the second of three parables about the end times from Matthew chapter 25. Today, we hear the parable of the talents.

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who goes on a journey, how long is anyone's guess. Certainly, the servants don't know when he plans to return. They only know that he leaves them in charge of his property. He hands over care of his things to the servants, giving one servant 5 talents, another 2 talents, and a third 1 talent.

I think you can see that Jesus is painting a picture for us of the Church age, that is, of the church from the time of His ascension into heaven to be seated at the Father's right hand to the day when He will come again in glory to settle accounts, that is, to judge the living and the dead. But, of course, in His going, Jesus handed over to His church the means by which the church would live and grow. He gave her baptism: *“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them”* (Matthew 28:19). He gave her a Word to preach: *“that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.”* Preach *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins ... in [Jesus'] name to all nations”* Luke 24:46-47). He gave her a meal to eat: *“Do this in remembrance of me”* (Luke 22:19), for *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes”* (1 Corinthians 11:26). He gave her a commandment: *“love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:12-13).

Now during the time of the master's absence, two of the servants in the parable were *“good and faithful.”* They put the talents to work and earned more. The one, who had received 5, earned 5 talents more; the one, who had received 2, earned 2 talents more. When the master returned to settle up, he commended them for their faithfulness. And there was no distinction between these two; each received talents according to his ability; each put them to use for the master. In fact, Jesus asked shortly before He tells these parables: *“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes”* (Matthew 24:45-46), that is, putting the talents to work. Thus, to these two servants, regardless the amount they were given at first, the master said, *“You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.”* And they were granted entrance *“into the joy of [their] master.”*

But the servant, who had received the 1 talent, was wicked and lazy. In contrast to the faithful servants, this servant considered his master as hard and unyielding,

*“reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] scattered no seed.”* Rather than putting the talent to work for his master, he buried it in the ground. Rather than faithful, he is called wicked and worthless. Rather than being commended, he is rebuked: *“you ought to have invested my money with the bankers,”* and punished: *“take the talent from him,”* and *“cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

Dear friends, the Lord has gone on a journey through the clouds to the right hand of the Lord. We are in the church age, and we are His servants whom He has left with talents to be used for His kingdom — in the church, to be faithful to His gifts, receiving His grace, in our lives to love and serve our neighbors.

This is our stewardship Sunday. You've received a letter reminding you of the work of the kingdom done here at Zion, and with a pledge card to return, having thought about how you might use in His kingdom the talents the Lord has entrusted to you. The pledge card is for your financial gifts, but I hope you have also thought about how you might use your bodies as sacrifices to the Lord (Romans 12:1), your hands in service to Him. We may have different abilities, but we all have been given something from the Lord, a trust from Him, something not to bury but to put to use. And this is what we pray: that we will be found faithful, receiving God's gifts, and doing the things that God gives us to do until Jesus returns in glory.

And when Jesus comes again, then we will hear the comforting words: *“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”* It's with that faith in Jesus, our Savior, who paid the debt we owe and set us free, that we can pray without fear for Jesus' return: *“O Jesus Christ, do not delay But hasten our salvation; We often tremble on our way In fear and tribulation. O hear and grant our fervent plea: Come, mighty judge, and set us free From death and ev'ry evil.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.