

Proper 14 (C)

Lk 12.32-40

I'm going to start by giving you a list of dates, and I'd like you to tell me what these dates have in common. I'm not going to give you specific days or even months, just years: so the question is, "What do these years have in common?"

Ready? Here are the years: 2011, 1914, and 1844. And no, the answer is not that they all have ones in them. Any guesses?

Here are a few more clues: 1988, 1736, and 1306.

Here's what all those years have in common: they were all years that someone predicted Christ would return. 1306, 1736, 1844, 1914, 1988, and 2011 were all scheduled to be the end of the world.

In 2011, it was the American broadcaster and evangelist Harold Camping who predicted Jesus would be coming back.

In 1988, an engineer for NASA named Edgar Whisenant released a book entitled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988*.

In 1914, it was the American minister Charles Russell who made the prediction; Russell founded the Bible School Movement, which turned into the Jehovah's Witnesses after Russell died.

In 1844, it was a Baptist preacher named William Miller, who taught a particular interpretation of the Bible that became known as Millerism.

And in 1736, an Englishman named William Whiston predicted the world was about to end. Whiston had succeeded Isaac Newton as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, so people took him pretty seriously. In fact, people took him *so* seriously that William Wake, who was the time the Archbishop of Canterbury, had to step in and calm public fears by reassuring people that Whiston's prediction was almost certainly inaccurate.

And on, and on, and on...I could keep going, but I think you get the point: predicting the return of Christ has been a favorite pastime of Christians for a long time. I even found an on-line automatic messaging system called "You've Been Left Behind" that will send e-mail messages to your family and friends in the event you get caught up in the Rapture and they don't.

Now, why do I mention all this? After all, we're too well-informed for any such foolishness, right? But here comes Jesus to shake us out of our modern, urbane sophistication: "You must ... be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

What are we supposed to do with this? Usually when we hear a passage like that, one of two things happens: we either begin obsessing about it, or we ignore it completely. Either we start

trying to figure out days and times and seasons and years, or we assume it's something that's so remote and so unlikely that it's nothing we should worry about. We even laugh a little at the people who obsess about it: we like to poke fun at people like Camping and Russell and Miller.

Both of those responses are wrong. Trying to figure out days and times and seasons will get you nowhere. Even Harold Camping eventually recognized this: when the day he predicted Christ would return in 2011 came and went, Camping revised his views. He acknowledged that his critics had been right, and he said he was going back to the Bible not to find the basis for a new prediction but to learn to be more faithful in his understanding.

But if trying to figure out days and times and seasons isn't the way to go, neither can we ignore these kinds of passages entirely; that's also a dead end. We may want to try and relegate the words of Jesus to the distant past and chalk them up to the primitive worldview of a pre-modern era, but I'm not sure Jesus gives us that option.

The reason both of these interpretations are wrong is they both rest on the same mistake. The mistake they both make is they take it for granted that passages like the one we have in this morning's gospel are about the second coming and the end of the world. But I don't think that's the case. Is there perhaps another way of understanding these texts? Is there a way of understanding this gospel and other stories like that makes it a little more relevant for us? I think there is.

Listen again to what Jesus says: "Be dressed for action; have your lamps lit. Be like those who are waiting for their master to return. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

These are the words of someone who has a lively sense of expectation about what God *is doing*; not what God has *already* done or even what God is *about* to do, but what God *is doing*. These are not the words of someone who is obsessing over dates and times and when and how, nor are these the words of someone who assumes that it doesn't really matter. These are the words of someone who believes God is acting *right now*. Yes, God has acted in the past, and yes, God will act in the future; but God is acting *right here* and *right now*, and you need to pay attention.

When Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, what he was talking about was the work he saw God doing in his ministry. He had already told his disciples, "We're going to Jerusalem, and when we get there the Son of Man is going to be betrayed." But they had no idea what he was talking about. Being handed over to the Gentiles and being killed and rising again after three days—that was all new to them.

But he kept hammering it home: get ready, get ready, get ready. God is working, the Spirit is moving, things are happening. Pay attention; be alert. But they never got it. Not until after it was all over did they begin to understand what had taken place, and even then it took them years to sort it all out.

Not that I'm blaming the disciples, mind you; being alert, being attentive to the present moment,

being aware of the activity of the living God is not something we humans do well. We seem to spend most of our time either obsessing about the past or worrying about the future. And so we miss what's going on right in front of us because we're always either trying to hold on to something that has already happened or we're anticipating something that hasn't yet happened.

After we do this for a while, we begin to lose our sensitivity to the present. We begin to think God never does anything because our attention is always focused away from the one time where God actually meets us, in the present.

Pretty soon, we actually start to lose any real sense of time: the horizon of our lives spreads out in a featureless, inanimate stretch of emptiness where nothing ever seems to happen, but we never seem to have enough time. When we try to live in the past or the future, we end up losing all sense of time itself; it's only when we live in the *present* that the past and the future fall into place.

So how do we live in the present? How do we keep our attention focused in a way that makes us mindful of what God is doing? Jesus tells us: "Be dressed for action; have your lamps lit. Be like those who are waiting for their master to return. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Jesus is the one who gives us the present moment; Jesus is the one who gives us a real sense of time. Time itself is one of God's creatures, part of God's good creation, and as part of God's creation time was created in Christ and through Christ and for Christ. In him all of time holds together. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all times. The purpose of time—the function of time within the context of God's creation—is nothing other than to mediate to us an awareness of the eternal activity of God in the present moment of our lives. The Son of Man is coming *now*...and he's coming *now*...and he's coming *now*.

All of this is to say that the God who meets us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is a living God. In God and to God, all times are present and all moments are now.

I once heard a story that makes the same point as this morning's gospel, but in a rather different way. It's a story about a junior demon, a tempter in the making, who has finished his training and is getting ready to be deployed to earth. But before he can go he has to pass a final test. So he's brought before a senior demon for examination, and the senior demon says, "Tell me what you're going to do to tempt the humans and draw them away from God."

The junior demon says, "I'll tell them there is no heaven." The senior demon responds, "That'll never work; they know too much. There's too much beauty and goodness and love in the world."

So the junior demon says, "I'll tell them there is no hell." The senior demon responds, "That won't work, either; they know too much. There's too much ugliness and suffering and hatred in the world."

So the junior demon says, "I'll tell them there is no hurry." And the senior demon smiles, and says to the junior demon, "You go and tell them that, and you will destroy them by the thousands."

The Son of Man is coming *today*; the Son of Man is coming *right now*. The only time there really is, the only time we ever really have, is the time that is given to us in Christ. God meets us here and now, today, in this place: we meet him in the testimony of the scriptures, we meet him in the sacrament of his body and blood, we meet him in the fellowship of his people.

When we stop obsessing about the past and stop worrying about the future, we find that he is already here, waiting for us to turn around and find him standing behind us, ready to meet us where we are, ready for us to find him where he has always been and where he always will be.

So be ready for action at a moment's notice; keep the lamp of your heart and the lamp of your mind always lit and burning. For the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, *today*, and blessed are those whom the Lord finds ready when he comes to them.

11 August 2019
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC