**Weekend of Sunday, November 19, 2023**

**25th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 33/Year A**

**First Reading: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18**

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:14-30**

**Sermon Title: *“Awakening to the Day of the LORD: Faithful Stewardship & Vigilance”***

**Theme**

*Our readings during November speak of the end times. Zephaniah proclaims that the coming day of the Lord will be filled with wrath and distress. Paul says it will come like a thief in the night and urges us to be awake and sober. Jesus tells the parable of the talents, calling us to use our gifts, while we still have time, for the greater and common good. In a world filled with violence and despair, we gather around signs of hope—word, water, bread, and wine—eager to welcome the good news of Christ’s coming among us.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18**

*Zephaniah (like the prophet Amos in last week’s first reading) presents the day of the Lord as one of judgment and wrath. Descriptions of the last day in the New Testament include details taken from Old Testament accounts of the day of the Lord.*

 7Be silent before the Lord God!
  For the day of the Lord is at hand;
 the Lord has prepared a sacrifice,
  he has consecrated his guests.

 12At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
  and I will punish the people
 who rest complacently on their dregs,
  those who say in their hearts,
 “The Lord will not do good,
  nor will he do harm.”
 13Their wealth shall be plundered,
  and their houses laid waste.
 Though they build houses,
  they shall not inhabit them;
 though they plant vineyards,
  they shall not drink wine from them.

 14The great day of the Lord is near,
  near and hastening fast;
 the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
  the warrior cries aloud there.
 15That day will be 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,
  16a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
 against the fortified cities
  and against the lofty battlements.

 17I will bring such distress upon people
  that they shall walk like the blind;
  because they have sinned against the Lord,
 their blood shall be poured out like dust,
  and their flesh like dung.
 18Neither their silver nor their gold
  will be able to save them
  on the day of the Lord’s wrath;
 in the fire of his passion
  the whole earth shall be consumed;
 for a full, a terrible end
  he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

*Though we do not know and cannot calculate the day of Christ’s return, we live faithfully in the here and now as we anticipate the day when we will be given eternal salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

**Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30**

*Jesus tells a parable about his second coming, indicating that it is not sufficient merely to maintain things as they are. Those who await his return should make good use of the gifts that God has provided them.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 14“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 24Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 30As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ”

**Sermon**

To begin, I have to confess that I am not a fan of the readings prescribed for today. My feeling is that all three have a threatening tone to them. I know how I am, when threatened I get defensive and angry, which doesn’t seem like the appropriate emotion for what I think the objective of the readings is, but let’s get started and see.

In the First Reading from Zephaniah, the prophet paints a vivid picture of the Day of the Lord. It will be a day of judgment and reckoning. It will be a day when God will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who have become complacent in their faith. This passage serves as a sobering reminder of the seriousness of our relationship with God.

Allow me to make up a story as an illustration that I think works better for our context. A man has an irritating condition, let’s say a skin condition. He’s not all that concerned about how it looks, but it can be painful and makes it difficult to shave. After months of frustration, he goes to his doctor and the doctor says it’s probably nothing, but if it bothers him, he ought to see a dermatologist.

He puts that off for a while, hoping the condition goes away, but it only gets worse. Finally, he sees a dermatologist, who is concerned enough to biopsy the spot. The dermatologist’s office calls back after the result is in and asks the man to schedule a follow-up appointment – which is a further irritation to the man because he doesn’t like going to the doctor, but the receptionist convinces him that this appointment is important and so he acquiesces.

At the follow-up appointment, the dermatologist tells the man that the biopsy came back positive for melanoma. The man knows enough to know that melanoma is a cancer that can be deadly if it goes untreated. The dermatologist continues explaining a treatment plan that the man should begin as soon as possible.

However, all of this is up to the man, right? He has to make decisions about his immediate and ongoing care and support.

The First Reading from Zephaniah comes from the period known as the Babylonian Exile. God loved His chosen people, the Israelites. In fact, He loved them so much that he gave them free will to love Him back. However, that is not the decision they made. They decided to be faithless and worship the pagan idols of the Canaanites in the land. God in God’s righteousness cannot bear to look upon human sin so God turned His back on the Israelites, and that is how they ended up being defeated by the Babylonians and taken into Exile.

It was in this scenario that the Prophet Zephaniah was called by the LORD to minister to the LORD and the LORD’s chosen people, the Israelites. The First Reading is only a portion of the message that the LORD gave to Zephaniah to give to the Israelites. The entire Book of Zephaniah is only 3 chapters covering only four and a half pages.

A summary of the entire prophecy would be something like this: ‘The LORD has witnessed your miserable state and has diagnosed you to be faithless. But out of the LORD’s great love for you, the LORD offers a treatment plan. You shall return to the LORD your God. From this day on, you shall be faithful to the LORD and only the LORD. If you change your ways and re-dedicate yourselves to the ancient covenants your ancestors swore to uphold, then to LORD will once again restore you. The LORD will take away the judgments against you. But you have a choice. You can also continue in your faithlessness, and that will result in even more trouble, heartache, and sorrow. What is your decision?’

Do you see what I did there? I gave you a story that I think explains the situation Zephaniah’s Israelites found themselves in. And I ended both stories with a choice. It seems to me that in both stories the decision is obvious.

Turning our attention to the Gospel Reading for a moment, like last week’s parable from earlier in the same chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, this week’s Gospel Reading has Jesus telling another parable. Do you realize that last week’s and this week’s Gospel Reading comes from the chapter 25, and the Palm Sunday experience is in chapter 21? We think that this passage took place on Tuesday of Holy Week, so Jesus is just three days from death and the end of his mission to save the world. Knowing that, we can understand his dis-ease, his amped-up intensity, and his lack of patience. He is running out of time, and the religious establishment is trying desperately to turn the people who waved palm branches and shouted Hallelujahs last Sunday against him.

I told you the significance of last week’s parable was that we are “to be prepared to meet” the Lord when he comes. That coming is his return, his second coming, as we sometimes call it.

In this week’s parable told by Jesus, there is a master who entrusts his servants with talents (a form of currency), and upon his return, he rewards those who multiplied their talents and rebukes the one who buried his. This parable underscores the importance of faithful stewardship and the consequences of spiritual complacency. Adding this parable to last week’s parable, we hear Jesus warning his listeners to be faithful to their call as God’s Chosen People now before it’s too late. Like the patient in the story I made up, the man has been given the gift of life. Do what you need to do to be a good steward of that gift now, or you may lose it. It doesn’t seem like much of a choice to me.

In First Thessalonians, Paul addresses the Thessalonian believers' questions about the same Second Coming of the Lord. He emphasizes that the day will come like a thief in the night, urging them to remain spiritually alert and sober. He encourages them to *put on faith, love, and the hope of salvation as they await His return*. “Put on,” that’s an interesting expression, isn’t it?

I do not enjoy wearing a suit. I am just certain that a woman designed the man’s suit, because, while we look good in them, they are just uncomfortable and restricting. And I am just as certain that a man designed the women’s high-heeled shoes, because men like the way they make a woman’s legs look longer, but I digress. Back to Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul wrote the Christian should 8“put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” That illustration works for me. Most of us make eye contact when we are among other people. Paul wrote that the first thing others ought to notice about us is our confidence in the ‘hope of our salvation.’ And then maybe the second thing they notice about us is our core and our core ought to exhibit “faith and love.” After all, it is from our core that we extend the hand of fellowship and the embrace of friendship and love.

Now think about your persona for a moment. What does your physical presence tell others about you? Some of us have more “faith and love” than others, don’t we? I don’t think that’s what Paul means!

Now, let's draw these passages together. Zephaniah's message reminds us of the seriousness of the Day of the Lord and warns against complacency in our faith.

1 Thessalonians calls us to remain spiritually vigilant, embracing faith, love, and the hope of salvation, and exhibiting that hope, faith, and love to all we encounter.

And Matthew's parable teaches us the value of faithful stewardship and the need to actively use our gifts and resources for Kingdom good now.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

So, how do we apply these teachings in our lives? I’m so glad you asked.

First, we must be aware of the reality of the Day of the Lord, recognizing the urgency of our faith and the need for a deep and genuine relationship with God.

Second, we should remain spiritually vigilant, putting on faith, love, and the hope of salvation daily.

Finally, we must be faithful stewards of the gifts and resources God has entrusted to us, using them to advance His Kingdom.

I don’t know when the end of the present age will be, and I am not going to predict it. But it’s coming is certain, because the Lord Jesus promised it. Since the middle of the fifth century, the Christian church has used the season of Advent as a time to remind ourselves of His promise to return. So in Advent, which starts in just three weeks, we have a diagnosis, a spiritual diagnosis. To hear today’s readings as threatening, causing us to get angry and defensive will not bring spiritual healing or our goal of life eternal with God.

However, these passages call us to heed the diagnosis and respond responsibly to be spiritually prepared, vigilant, and faithful stewards as we await the Day of the Lord. May we embrace the seriousness of our faith, live in anticipation of Christ's return, and use our gifts and resources to bring glory to God. In doing so, we prepare ourselves and others for the coming of our Lord. And we should also wear sunscreen.

**Prayer**

O God, You know how stubborn Your people can be. Help us, in spite of our stubbornness, to listen to Your call from scripture, heed the warnings, and prepare ourselves to meet Your Son and our Lord Jesus when he returns. We pray this in His holy name. Amen