

I have a Red Letter Bible that I use when writing a sermon, and normally, I get excited when I open my Bible to the text that the lectionary has assigned me to preach that day and see that it's wall-to-wall Red Letters, signifying the direct words of Jesus. As the author and perfecter of our faith, his teachings are usually a delight to preach and teach from; in Youth Group this summer we've worked our way through the Sermon on the Mount: three chapters chock-full of Jesus's most influential and challenging teachings. "Love your enemies", the Golden Rule, the Beatitudes...we've gone through some real Hall-of-Fame Jesus-ism's! But then I hit a text like today's, all colored red, in which Jesus compares us to slaves and tells us to be ready for the return of the Son of Man, lest we receive a severe beating...and I get a little nervous.

I get nervous when Jesus says things that I wish he hadn't, or omits things that I wish he had said. The word for slave, *Doulos*, appears eight times in this section, and while many Bible translations try to soften this word by translating it as servant, the more accurate interpretation is indeed slave. While the slavery in the first century middle east was markedly different from that of American chattel slavery, it was still the ownership of other human beings, and often brutal. I get nervous that Jesus uses this as his analogy of choice, and doesn't even slip in a quick "oh and by the way, guys, please stop enslaving others."

I get nervous, because this text also makes reference to the sudden return of Christ and the final judgment, two topics that make the formerly-evangelical hairs on the back of my neck stand up. While I could probably lean on my denominational roots and deliver a pretty solid turn-or-burn sermon, that's not quite my style nor my view of God's judgment anymore...and yet, here we have Jesus, running his mouth about the master coming back and severely beating those who have been unfaithful.

What do we do, with texts like these, where Jesus doesn't fit in the boxes we try and put him in, or he pushes up against the theology we have carefully tried to craft or rebuild after all these years?

Jesus doesn't need my damage control; he doesn't need me to sanitize or twist these parables into more palatable versions for us to hear and understand them. He doesn't need us to wait until we've fully figured out our eschatology, our beliefs about the end times, to begin engaging with this text. Perhaps, rather, all he needs is for us to take seriously the qualities that he is urging us to embody here: to be watchful and to be faithful.

His first parable asks us to take on the role of slaves awaiting their master's return, fully dressed with our lamps lit, ready for that sudden knock on the door. Us watchful slaves will be rewarded for our alertness not just by avoiding a beating, but Jesus flips the roles a bit and notes that the master will actually come and serve the slaves upon finding them ready and waiting. God, though above us in every way, desires to serve us, to lavish upon us goodness and sustenance and sit at the table of fellowship with us. But the implication here is if we're not watchful and ready...then what? Is Christ's return to be a blink-and-you'll-miss-it kind of deal? How watchful do we need to be?

While many scholars agree that this text has something to do with the parousia, the return of Christ, there is much disagreement on to what extent. Jesus doesn't shy away from getting prophetic in other parts of Luke: in chapter 9 he predicts his betrayal to the disciples, and in chapter 21 he describes the coming destruction of the temple, the persecution and even deaths of some of the 12, and again references the return of this "Son of Man" figure that we see in

today's text. In this prediction, he talks about signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and nations rising up against nations.

Are these the types of things that Jesus wants us to be watchful and ready for, anxiously looking around for the right signs of our master's return? I have my doubts.

Many of us, at this point, have lived through several apocalypses, those days in which the world was supposed to end, but didn't. I was only four years old during the Y2K crisis, but I've heard stories of the panic that took hold at the thought of computers switching into year 2000 and causing a chain reaction of unknown catastrophes: mass blackouts worldwide, nuclear weapons blowing up simultaneously, the money in bank accounts wiped out in an instant. The hardcore survivalists prepped their doomsday bunkers and stocked up on canned goods. Yet, when the clock struck midnight, the world kept on turning.

Again, in 2012, the cultural doomsday hype bubbled up again as people reflected on the end of an epoch of the Mayan calendar. People who probably couldn't even point to where the Mayan empire was located on a map began sensationalizing and speculating about this celestial turn of events. A major blockbuster movie was made of the theory, giving us a "what-if" scenario, where the world ends in ruin. But again, here we are in 2025, with the Earth still spinning on. It's easy for us to chuckle when the apocalypse is predicted by cultures far removed from our own, but by and large the majority of these erroneous predictions that blip up into the news cycle are from Christians. Evangelical pastors like Harold Camping and Pat Robertson preached to their audiences of thousands about specific dates of Jesus's return that have come and gone. Ronald Weinland, who founded an entire denomination based around rapture-prediction, saw his predictions fail in 2011, 2012, and again in 2019. Their attempts to be watchful and ready for Jesus's return led to nothing but false promises and disillusioned believers. And for what? Trying to discern the moment of Jesus's return serves little but our selfish desire for knowledge and self-preservation. And at its worst, a theology of endtimes-obsession results in the phenomenon we see today: entire groups of Christians who cheer on the unspeakable violence occurring in the Middle East because they think it means Jesus is coming back sooner. Surely this can't be what Jesus means when he tells us to be watchful and ready?

In the other times in Luke when Jesus does delve into prediction and endtimes-talk, he does so not with his eyes and commands set in the future, but in the present. When he warns the disciples of his betrayal in Luke 9, it's not so they can sleuth out the culprit and attempt to stop the inevitable, but to start preparing them now for life without him physically present. When he pontificates about the destruction and persecution to come in Luke 21, he does not do so to hasten that horrible day, but to give the people around him a message of hope to cling to when the darkness comes. And in our text today, I believe that he brings up these parables not so that we will bury our faces in Daniel or Revelation and try to figure out what we need to be ready for, but quite the opposite. Our faces must be looking around, watchful and ready for opportunities to faithfully live out the teachings, service, and commands of Christ.

Because watchfulness is only one half of the equation; Jesus's second parable calls us into faithful action. He says "Blessed is the slave who the master finds at work when he arrives." We are to be working, doing what God has called us to do, when he returns. We can sit on our hands in the pews and sing "I'll Fly Away" until God whisks us off of this earth, but who does that help? Where does that leave the millions of people outside of these walls who are suffering

physically, emotionally, or spiritually? Our anticipation of Jesus, our desire for the restoration of all things, should compel us to work, not wait. Jesus, when confronting his own demise and judgement day, set his face toward Jerusalem, toward the future, yes, but that didn't stop him from continuing to heal, to teach, to help, and to save in the present. Us slaves, gifted with the knowledge of God's will and charged with the care of God's flock, are warned against wasting our time waiting, or worse yet, using our time between now and Christ's return to hurt our fellow slave brethren.

This passage is often used as a "you'd better get right with God before it's too late" text. And perhaps that's what it is. But what I find endlessly fascinating is what Peter asks in between these two parables: "Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?" He heard the first part, and while we can't hear his tone in the text, it reads the same to me as a student asking a teacher "do we all have to do this assignment, or just some of us?" Peter heard Jesus calling people slaves and telling them to be watchful and ready, and he wanted to know if this applied to the whole class. Jesus's answer is clever; he does make it clear that he desires for all to be doing the watchful and faithful good work of the master before his return. But he makes a distinction: those who know the master's will and those who do not. Jesus says if you know what God is all about, you'll be treated with more scrutiny and severity than those who do not.

So the answer to Peter's question? It's for everyone...but you, Peter, and all of those who claim to know me deeply are more on the hook for your behavior.

I find this fascinating, because so much of endtimes-based preaching is targeted at nonbelievers or those of other faiths: you'd better hurry up and believe in Jesus before it's too late. We've all seen the billboards driving east: Do YOU know where you'll go when you die? Yet if Jesus is to be believed here, the ones who REALLY need to check themselves and get right with God...are us. Church people. Those who know the master's will...is that not who we claim or try to be? Presbyterians, in particular, pride ourselves on our emphasis on Christian education and our attempts to be continually reforming as we seek and uncover more and more of God's will for a changing world. I'm guilty, as I know many are in this congregation, of having fun snickering and scoffing at other Christian denominations, populations, or politicians that perform their religion and interpret their faith wildly differently than I do, because of course, WE are right and they are wrong. Jesus sees that attitude of superior faith and says, okay, bet: you think that you have been entrusted with the true knowledge of God's will? Then you had better live like it, because much is expected of you.

If all that my "perfect" theology compels me to do is complain about the beliefs or problems of others, then I am indeed that slave who is not ready for his master's return. We have been entrusted with so much: a beautiful and thriving church family, our daily needs of food, water and shelter met, a place to live in one of the ten richest counties in the USA. Jesus does not condemn our privilege, but he does make it clear that he expects us to use it for the betterment of his kingdom. Will we be the slave who says "my master is a long way off" and proceeds to use his time self-indulging and exploiting others? Or will we be watching and ready, using our knowledge and time to take care of the least of these?

I confess, I do not know what I fully believe about the return of Christ and judgement day. Will it be magnificent and holy or apocalyptic and fearful? What does Jesus mean when

describing the Son of Man doling out light and heavy beatings? I don't know. My eschatology still has plenty of problems to work out and wrestle with. But if this parable points toward any answer, it's that Jesus's strongest discipline is not for the nonbelievers: the atheist or the Muslim or the person who you think lives a "degenerate" lifestyle. How can we expect non-Christians to follow our rules, friends, especially when they look at our churches and see people full of anger and self-righteousness? These parables are for us, self-proclaimed followers of Christ; we are on the hook. We have been entrusted with a beautiful gospel and a beautiful life. May we not squander these gifts, for the Lord expects much from us.

May it be so. Amen.