

“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning,³⁶ like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him.³⁷ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.³⁸ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night.³⁹ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.⁴⁰ You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

⁴¹ Peter asked, “Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?”

⁴² The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?⁴³ It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns.⁴⁴ I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.⁴⁵ But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk.⁴⁶ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

⁴⁷ “That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows.⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. (Luke 12:35-48)

How Can We Be Ready this Year?

Well, the world didn’t end on December 21st, did it? Were you surprised? Probably not. Most of us realized that even the Mayans didn’t think that the world was going to end that day. But we did have some pretty serious signs of the end, didn’t we? Just one week before that day, there was the Connecticut school shooting – 20 kids and several of their teachers dead in a senseless act of violence. Just three days after the 21st, on Christmas Eve, a man in New York set fire to a home to lure fire fighters there and killed two of them. The end is coming. Are we ready? Tonight is the end of 2012 and after news stories like that, I’m not sorry to see it go. But do you think 2013 is going to be any better? Every day that we live in this world, we will see signs of Jesus’ return. Tonight, he tells us to be ready. What does that mean? We’re not talking about stocking up supplies and ammunition in the basement in case society collapses. We’re not talking about diversifying your stock portfolio so that you’re able to withstand whatever the fiscal cliff does or doesn’t bring. We’re talking about preparing our hearts and lives. **How can we be ready this year?**

I.

Jesus says, **“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him.”** In Jesus’ day, crime was a serious problem, so wealthy people built their houses like fortresses to keep bad guys out. That meant that when the master was out at night, like at wedding reception, his servants would bar the doors and close the windows so that nobody could come in – not even the master. But of course, when he came home the master wanted to be let in. So he would assign a servant the task of waiting and watching. That servant would have to stay up, dressed, and with a lamp burning so that as soon as his master arrived, he could let him in. Of course, there were no cell phones. The master couldn’t call when he was five minutes out and tell them to get ready. They had no way of knowing how long he might stay at a wedding reception – at that time, they sometimes went on for a week. The servants just had to wait and watch. Understand, at this time, most people went to bed when the sun went down. So staying up for hours waiting for the master to come meant a serious battle to stay awake.

Like those servants, we have no way of knowing when Jesus will return. We’ve just finished a year of waiting and watching and Christ did not come. Will he come in the new year? Jesus says, **“It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes.”** Again, he says, **“It will be good for**

those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night.” No matter how late it gets, it’s worth it to watch for Christ. Jesus says, **“I tell you the truth, he [the master] will dress himself to serve, will have them [the servants] recline at the table and will come and wait on them.”**

Jesus will serve us when he comes back. What does that mean? Well, think how many times Jesus uses the picture of a wedding banquet for heaven. We’re going to be God’s invited guests in heaven. He’s going to provide all that we need. He’s going to purge away all sin and sorrow and doubt and fear. He’s going to make us perfect in every way and give us joy that will last forever. So Jesus uses this incredible picture of him serving us while we sit at the table and feast.

That’s why we watch. But how do we watch? How do we make ourselves ready? By feeding our faith. How do we do that? Well, it begins with what we’re doing right now. We come and hear the word of God, again and again. We confess our sins and we hear that those sins are forgiven. We come to communion and receive Jesus’ body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. In all those ways, we prepare our souls. When we hear the gospel, God reaches into our hearts and he fuels our faith. Once we hear that we’re forgiven, God gives us a desire to go home and serve him with our lives. Our faith lives in our relationship with our spouse and in our love for our children. Our faith shows itself in the work we do on the job and at home. Our faith testifies about Christ in the compassion we have on those who are hurting and in need and who still don’t know their Savior. We come and hear that we are forgiven and then we go home and change our lives.

Jesus tells us to be ready. Like a thief in the night, he will come at an hour in which we don’t expect him. There is no day on this earth in which we can put off taking care of our faith until tomorrow. But to every Christian who feeds his faith and who watches for Jesus, God promises the blessings of his love for all eternity. As we look forward to another year, let’s be ready every day. **How can we be ready this year? By preparing our souls.**

II.

Peter asked Jesus if he was telling this parable for the disciples or for everybody. To understand Jesus’ parables, we do need to understand who he was speaking to. Jesus was really speaking to everyone, but then he tweaked his image a little bit to zero in on leaders in his Church like Peter. He said, **“Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?”** Here, we get the impression of a master leaving for a longer period of time. So when he goes, he puts one servant in charge. He’s provided supplies so that the other slaves have food to eat while he’s gone. This steward has a tremendous responsibility. And again, Jesus says that it will be good for that servant if the master finds him doing his work when he comes back.

But then comes the ominous alternative: **“But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk.”** Jesus is talking about leadership in the church. God has entrusted every congregation to the care of pastors and teachers and lay leaders. God has entrusted every Christian family to the care of believing parents, sometimes only one, sometimes both, but God has given to us all people who are assigned to care for us spiritually. And he did that because he loves us. Those parents and pastors and teachers and lay leaders all work for our good. And God will most certainly bless those who faithfully discharge their responsibilities – not because we’ve earned a reward, but because he wants to give a gift to those who are faithful.

But not everyone is faithful. Every father does not rule his household well. Every mother does not support her husband’s efforts to teach her children to know the Lord. Every pastor or teacher or lay leader does not approach his work as a solemn responsibility imparted to him by God. It’s just too easy for us to be selfish. It’s too easy for the respect and the authority that come with those positions to go to our head. Sadly, the world is full of pastors and teachers who serve themselves, of lay leaders who think that it’s all about how important they feel. The world is full of parents who fail to make their children’s faith their number one priority. Jesus says, **“The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.”**

Those are scary words. Can any of us church leaders claim that we’ve never lost sight of the responsibility God has given us? Can any of us parents claim that everything we’ve done has been for the spiritual good of our children? Or do we have to admit that selfishness and laziness are too much a part of who

we are? Do we have to admit that there have been hundreds, even thousands of times, when Jesus could've returned and found us deep in sin or simply ignoring our responsibilities? And isn't true that every New Year that passes without Jesus returning makes it easier for us to put him and his call on the back burner?

Jesus points out that people like us, people who know what God wants from us and fail to give it are in much greater danger than those who don't know what God demands and still sin. All unbelievers will go to hell. And it won't be pleasant for any of them. But hell will be much worse for those who knew the truth and were given responsibility and threw their faith away. Jesus says, **"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."** How much has God given you? How much has God entrusted you with during this past year? Did you have the gospel in its truth and purity? You did at Peace. Did you have faith and God's love and forgiveness and the opportunity to grow week after week? Did you have opportunities to bring your children to church and to read the Bible with them at home and to talk about their faith? Have you been faithful this year?

Those are hard questions. I would call many of you faithful. But my judgment isn't the one that matters. God's is. And God's standard is perfection. God has given us so much, we know the Bible so well, have we as a congregation been lazy in sharing it? Do we deserve to be cut to pieces and assigned a place with unbelievers? You know the truth. You know we do. We're all sinners and we haven't come close to perfection, no matter how hard we've tried. For every minute of faithfulness, there has been at least a minute of temptation and all too many of those minutes the sinner inside us won and we ignored God's call to live for him. For that we all deserve death and hell.

But on this New Year's Eve, the final entry in God's record of our lives for 2012 is not our sin. It's his grace. God has indeed given us much. He gave us Jesus. He gave us his own Son to live and die and rise and erase all those sins. Jesus died for you and for me. Jesus rose and wiped away all our guilt. Jesus sent me to announce the grace of God to you. And as your pastor, I forgive you for all your sins. Know that that forgiveness is as real and certain in heaven itself as if Jesus himself had spoken here tonight.

Now, as forgiven children of God, commit yourselves to being ready in 2013. God has given you his word and sacraments. Use them. God has given you children and a congregation that needs to be fed. Be a part of that process. Teach your children the word. Talk about their faith with them and let them see you feeding your faith and taking God's word seriously. Be a part of our congregation's efforts to reach out and to teach and to serve God, not for a reward, but because God has already given you everything. Be faithful to the grace God has given you. That's the point. **How can we be ready this year? By being faithful to God's gift of the gospel.**

The end didn't come in 2012, at least it hasn't so far. And if we go another three or four hours without seeing the Lord return, then 2013 will begin. And maybe it will end and we'll still be here. Or maybe Jesus will come back already tomorrow morning. But no matter when he comes, be ready. Hear his word. Feed your faith. And serve him here and at home. Amen.