

## A Wake-Up Call

The two texts that Sharon read for us today are *tricky* texts; they are not easy for us to hear or make sense of. There are a number of reasons for that. One of the reasons is that both of these texts arise out of a particular context. They arise out of questions that are being asked, questions about the end times, what Scripture calls the Day of the Lord, the second coming, the return of Jesus at the end of the age.

That's a little more obvious in the reading from First Thessalonians, where the day of the Lord is explicitly mentioned; it's described as coming like a thief in the night. The gospel reading from Matthew is a parable, and if you look at what's right around it in the gospel of Matthew, you see that it is also told in the context of Jesus teaching the disciples about the end times, the time of the coming of the Son of Man.

Let's do a brief review together.

A few weeks back, we had stories of Jesus coming into conflict with the scribes and the Pharisees, where they tried to trick him and trip him up. Two Sundays ago, Alice explored with you Jesus' critique of the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees. Between that passage and today's passage, Jesus harshly condemns the religious leaders of his time, and even

predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the centre of their world.

That's what prompts the disciples to ask about signs of the end. Jesus describes a time of wars and rumors of wars, persecutions, and false messiahs. He describes the Day of the Lord, the coming of the Son of Man, and he concludes with a call for them to "keep awake," a call that's echoed in the reading from First Thessalonians.

This is the context, these are the questions these stories are responding to. Now—knowing that may not be making this any less tricky for us, and some of you may be having trouble keeping awake listening to this sermon—but stick with me for a bit!

A challenge for us is that questions about the end times, the Day of the Lord, are probably not "top of mind" questions for many of us. We hear these readings, and we wonder "What does this have to do with us?" It sounds like ancient history, some strange bit of Scripture that isn't meant for our ears.

Now, it's true that are some details in these texts, some historical artifacts whose meaning is lost to us across the distance of two millennia. But the Church also regards these texts as Holy Scripture, so our baseline assumption has to be that,

in fact, these particular texts do have something to say to us in this particular church, in our particular time.

Let's look at this repeated call to keep awake. It's there in the First Thessalonians reading as I said, but it's also in the background of the gospel reading. This parable of the talents is part of a set of three parables: the parable of the faithful slave, then the parable of the ten bridesmaids, and finally, the parable of the talents. All three of these parables have a background image of delayed arrival of the master, the passage of time, and what happens in the meantime, in the in-between time.

Now keep in mind these are stories being told amongst the first generations of Christians—First Thessalonians is written less than twenty years after Jesus' crucifixion. Already in the first generations of the church there is a tendency to fall asleep! Already in the first generations there is a perceived need to say, "Hey! Stick with it! Keep sharp! Don't go dozing off! Don't drift away! Keep awake!"

How much more so do we need to hear this message, this wake-up call! If the first generations of Christians were already drifting off, how much more likely it is for us twenty centuries later to be sound asleep? Asleep to what? Asleep to Jesus' teachings, asleep to what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, asleep to the realization that the world was forever changed on the cross.

Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds them that they "belong to the day," that in the cross of Jesus all of their

old ways have been put to death, and they have been born anew. As reborn people, their lives ought to look different than they did before.

He's urging them not to backslide, not to revert to their old ways. Positively, he's encouraging them to keep building one another up, again as a sign of their new life in Christ. It's a wake-up call.

The parable of the talents can also be read as a call to steadfastness, to faithfulness, to sticking with it over time, to staying awake. In the story the master entrusts his property to his servants and then goes away for "a long time," leaving them to manage in the meantime.

Two of the servants use what is given in the service of the master, and the third digs a hole in the ground and buries what he has been given. In a way, the first two are awake and engaged in their master's service, while the third is asleep.

Eventually, there is a day of reckoning, the day of the master's return. Each servant has to give an account of what they have done with what they had been given. And this is perhaps another aspect of the story with which we are uncomfortable, the notion of judgement, of reckoning.

The story ends badly—very badly indeed—for the third servant, the one who had buried the talent, while the first two are praised and rewarded.

It seems to me that in the context that we've been talking about, what is being praised and rewarded here is that the first two kept at it, they stayed actively engaged in the service of their

master, enduring and sticking with it even in the event of a long delay.

Surely this is a message to us, a wake-up call for us twenty centuries on. How actively engaged are we in our master's service? Or, conversely, have we fallen asleep? If we have, it would be no surprise: as I said, Christians in the first generation were already drifting away, and needing reminders.

If they were already susceptible to backsliding, forgetting the new life they had found and reverting to the ways of the world around them, how much more so are we susceptible to those same temptations? How much harder it seems for us to stay awake to a story that sometimes seems so distant from us.

And yet this is our story every bit as much as it was their story: the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the story of God's decisive intervention in the history of the world, this story that changes everything about our lives and our world.

Our challenge is to stay awake to this story, and not to allow ourselves to be lulled into inertia and apathy by other stories, the stories that our culture tells us, or that our politicians tell us. The world would convince us that our primary identity is as consumers or economic actors or partisans of a particular ideology. We start to believe that life is about buying things to make us happy, or amassing wealth, or winning at politics.

But God our heavenly master has a different standard of measurement. God doesn't care about how much stuff we have amassed, or how much money; God

is not a partisan of any particular ideology. We see what God cares about by looking at what God does. God entrusts his treasures to us, even before he knows whether or not we are worthy stewards. God in Jesus poured his life out in service to the lowly, the lonely, the outcast.

As a group we are amongst the most blessed people who have lived in all of human history. Collectively, we have great material wealth, and most of us live with a high degree of peace and personal security. We have been given a lot. But a lot of what we spend our lives pursuing might look to God like we're burying our treasure in the ground. These stories are a wake-up call for us, a reminder to keep awake to what God has done.

We may not like the idea of judgement or a day of reckoning; and we may not know what to make of the Day of the Lord, the second coming, the day of Jesus' return. But as Christians we have been baptized into this story, we have been given a new identity, we have been gifted and blessed with so much, we have been given all we need to live into our calling.

God has done this all for us, entrusted his treasures to us: the life of his Son Jesus Christ, the ongoing, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. So may we keep awake, and engage in the joy of our master's service, that we might be able to say on that day: Lord, here's what I've done with what you gave me. My life is my little way of saying, Thanks.

Let us pray:<sup>1</sup>

Lord, we thank you for loving us enough not to leave us to our own

devices. You gave us a higher standard of judgment for our lives than what seems right personally to us. You not only bless us with great gifts but you hold us accountable for our use of these gifts. We know that we have been greatly blessed, but we also know that for those to whom much is given, much will be required.

Give us the grace to live our lives so that when you judge us you might take great joy in the way we have used your gifts in the living of our lives. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, ad.