

## **BE READY**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Dec. 2, 2018  
based on Luke 12:35-40; 17:20-21***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled “The Kingdom Is at Hand.” We noted last week that Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God more than about any other subject; he began his ministry with the proclamation, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:15) The New Testament scholar Leander Keck offered a very good definition of the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ preaching when he said, “The kingdom of God is not a place but a situation in which God’s rule is fully in effect.” So the kingdom of God is in heaven, and the kingdom of God is also on earth whenever God’s rule takes hold in human hearts and minds, and human life becomes thereby what it is meant to be—life in harmony with God and with one another. This means that the kingdom of God is emerging in this world as people respond to God in faith and loving service. So Jesus urged his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

This morning we continue our focus on how the kingdom of God is at hand and can take hold in us. {prayer}

On the top of a hill in Amman, Jordan, which was the Old Testament city of Ammon and the Greco-Roman city of Philadelphia, there stands the temple of Hercules. Inside the temple was a forty-foot high statue of Hercules, who was an image of great strength. We know the statue was that high because of what is left of it—a few fingers from a hand, from which we can deduce the scale of the rest of the statue. The temple itself was never completed, which we know because there are not enough pillars, even including the ones lying on the ground, to finish the building; and the statue itself was destroyed in an earthquake, with most of the marble subsequently carted off to make other things. The whole structure is thus emblematic of the many grandiose projects we undertake as human beings. We launch into grand undertakings, building whole empires, which appear to show great strength; but eventually even our most glorious efforts crumble.

The Bible talks about a kingdom that comes about in a way utterly different from human empire building. It comes not by displays of power and the setting up of monuments; it comes quietly, gently, almost stealthily, through the movement of God’s Spirit into human hearts. As that passage we heard from Luke 17 stated, “Once when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21)

But if the kingdom of God arrives through a spiritual movement of God into our hearts and minds, a central question is whether we will be receptive to the coming of God

to us. Jesus told several parables on exactly this theme—whether we are ready for the coming of the Lord into our lives.

One such parable was the one we heard from Luke chapter 12, where Jesus said, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those servants.”

In this parable, the master of the house is away at a wedding banquet. The implication is not that the master himself is getting married but that he is attending a wedding feast. A banquet like this in the ancient near east was a major event that could stretch way into the night, so that the master could easily return home in the middle of the night, or near dawn.

The servants in the master’s household are waiting for the master’s return. The door to the house would be locked from the inside. If all the servants in the house were asleep when the master returned, the master would be stuck banging on the door trying to rouse someone, so that he could get in. Blessed are those servants, Jesus said, who are alert, who are dressed for action, who have their lamps lit, so that as soon as the master knocks, they can open the door for him.

The master in the parable quite clearly represents Christ. The wedding banquet in Jesus’ parables is a symbol for the Kingdom of God; so the image of the master coming from the banquet is an image of the kingdom coming to us in Christ. The servants in the parable represent us—and the thrust of the parable is thus to urge us to keep spiritually alert, in order that we may be receptive to Christ and ready to welcome his working in our lives.

A key aspect of the parable is that the servants know only that the master will come; they do not know exactly when. This portrays the fact that God works in ways and at times that we cannot predict; therefore, we are urged to be attentive. This relates to a major theme of the Advent season—that we need to be spiritually watchful, so that we are ready at all times for how the Lord would enter into our lives.

But then the parable also has—like many of the parables of Jesus—a surprising twist. It goes on to say, “Blessed are those servants whom the master finds alert when he comes; he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.” This is precisely what a typical householder in the ancient near east would *not* do. A master of a house arriving home in the middle of the night would expect the servants to serve *him*. But in the parable, the master upon his arrival has the servants sit down, and he serves *them*. This of course is because the master represents Christ, who comes to us with

blessing, who gives himself in service, and said of himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” (Mark 10:45)

The parable thus makes plain that God’s Kingdom works in a way radically different from the kingdoms of this world. Whereas earthly kingdoms function through the exercise of hierarchy and power, God’s Kingdom operates through grace and loving service.

Yesterday morning, our Confirmation Class spent three hours of their Saturday helping little kids pick out Christmas gifts and wrap them for members of their families. They were serving at the County Clothing Center, which this church actually founded, helping at the Santa’s Shop, which is a ministry in which children from low-income families can get Christmas gifts for their family members for free. This is not a ministry that makes headlines; but this is exactly how God works—through humble forms of self-giving service. God’s Kingdom breaks into this world as the followers of Jesus join in the movement of His Spirit to reach out in God’s love for others.

So the question for each of us is whether we are in fact receptive to how God is at work to touch and inspire our lives today. The parable urges us to be ready to open the door for Christ. It is significant that this exact image reappears at the very end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, where the Risen Christ says, “I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (Rev. 3:20) Both the parable and the Revelation image declare that Christ comes to us, both invite us to open the door of our lives to welcome Christ in, and both go on to declare that the Lord, upon entering in, will share in a meal with us, which is an image of sharing in a close and nourishing fellowship together.

All this is portrayed in a profound way in the sacrament of Communion. We declare in the sacrament that the Lord has come into our midst. We are encouraged to step forth to welcome Christ into our own lives. And we are invited to join in a spiritual meal with Christ, in which we can receive the grace and transforming blessing of Christ, and his empowerment to share in his self-giving love for all.