

Living for the Unexpected Hour

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St. Mary the Virgin

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Luke 12:32-40

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"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 slaves 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 slaves.

"But know 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. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." **Gen 15** After these events, the LORD's word came to Abram in a vision, "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your protector. Your reward will be very great."

² But Abram said, "LORD God, what can you possibly give me, since I still have no children? The head of my household is Eliezer, a man from Damascus." ³ He continued, "Since you haven't given me any children, the head of my household will be my heir."

⁴ The LORD's word came immediately to him, "This man will not be your heir. Your heir will definitely be your very own biological child." ⁵ Then he brought Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them." He continued, "This is how many children you will have." ⁶ Abram trusted the LORD, and the LORD recognized Abram's high moral character.

Heb 11 Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. ² The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith.

³ By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible.

⁴ By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice to God than Cain, which showed that he was righteous, since God gave approval to him for his gift. Though he died, he's still speaking through faith.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he didn't see death, and *he wasn't found because God took him up*. He was given approval for having pleased God before he was taken up. ⁶ It's impossible to please God without faith because the one who draws near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards people who try to find him.

⁷ By faith Noah responded with godly fear when he was warned about events he hadn't seen yet. He built an ark to deliver his household. With his faith, he criticized the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes from faith.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out without knowing where he was going.

⁹ By faith he lived in the land he had been promised as a stranger. He lived in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were coheirs of the same promise. ¹⁰ He was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

¹¹ By faith even Sarah received the ability to have a child, though she herself was barren and past the age for having children, because she believed that the one who promised was faithful. ¹² So descendants were born from one man (and he was as good as dead). They were as many as the number of the stars in the sky and as countless as the grains of sand on the seashore. ¹³ All these people died in faith without receiving the promises, but they saw the promises from a distance and welcomed them. They confessed that they were strangers and immigrants on earth. ¹⁴ People who say this kind of thing make it clear that they are looking for a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking about the country that they had left, they would have had the

opportunity to return to it. ¹⁶ But at this point in time, they are longing for a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God isn't ashamed to be called their God—he has prepared a city for them.

What does it mean to be the church 2,000 years after the Resurrection? Paul recasts his expectations as the Parousia, that is the 2nd Coming, is delayed. In his early letters he expects the Risen Lord to arrive during his lifetime but in Philippians he revises his expectation to say that (Phil 1:21¹) for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

Luke writes today's Gospel reading many years after Paul and many scholars believe Luke is wrestling with the establishment of a church. He is urging the church to be vigilant for it never knows when the last day will come.

We are of course much too sophisticated to actually expect the last day to come in our lifetimes or soon. We have seen in recent years what happens when the end is predicted either by Christians or by those who give mystical significance to the Mayan Calendar. Life continues. We pray for the Kingdom to come, especially in the Lord's Prayer, with no real understanding of what that would mean. Luke urges us to be constantly vigilant because the end might come momentarily but it has been impossible to remain vigilant for 2,000 years.

Our failure to take vigilance seriously has led to our need to be realistic and reinterpret the gospel to meet current needs. This means we don't have to take today's Gospel seriously. You and I aren't, the modern church will teach us, really expected to sell all that we have and give alms sacrificially. We are only expected to do it metaphorically. Anything else would be unrealistic and not the American Way.

What would it mean to take Luke seriously? He is wrestling with believers who wonder if Jesus was wrong because the end of the world had not come. The Resurrection had occurred. We know from Acts, volume 2 of Luke, that Pentecost has occurred and the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, has been received by the church. All of these signs of the end yet, the world continues. How do we be the church living with the delay of the Parousia?

The short answer is we turn to politics and power so that we can be practical in the real world that surrounds us. To live in the imminent expectation of the end is naïve. We are sophisticated so we turn to politics and power. We seek the preservation of an institution and treat the faithful as donors or clients and not as fellow ministers working together to respond to the Gospel.

We've seen this in action at the gathering of the Anglican Communion's bishops in England at Lambeth¹.

I have been following what happened at our General Convention and what is happening now at Lambeth. I imagine Jesus would be distressed at some of what General Convention did and appalled at what seems to be tying Lambeth in knots.

Rather than focusing on preaching and conversion, we are tied up by sexuality and that is costing us the focus and energy to face more serious problems. It seems obvious that TEC has accepted as normative the ordination of

¹ Actually at Kent although they spent 1 day at Lambeth. There are too many for Lambeth to accommodate.

woman and not only the ordination of LGBTQ people but also their marriage. However conservatives in TEC are trying to keep the Marriage Rite heterosexual. It is not enough that no priest is ever obligated to marry anyone, this conservative rear guard wants us to realize that marriage between two same sex people is always and by definition, deficient. They are doing this by refusing to extend the Prayer Book marriage rite to LGBTQ people, leaving them with a form, while effective, is authorized for use but not a part of the BCP².

If we know anything about Jesus we know that he was creative, if not rebellious, in his interpretation and living the bible. He challenged the sclerotic leadership of his time. He wasn't alone in doing this, the Qumran or Dead Sea community was formed because they believed the Jerusalem cult was too corrupt for valid worship to happen there. So he wasn't alone but his work endured in a way theirs has not.

Along the way, especially post-Constantine, the church became a business, a culture, a force in politics and lost the gospel. I understand why a cultural church, a business and a political group would want to hang onto every member and make compromises to do so, but the gospel doesn't compromise and it can't be made to conform to a few verses that are blown out of context and proportion to persecute LGBTQ people.

If the actions at General Convention on these issues are disappointing the talk at Lambeth is if not scandalous at least close to it.

If we measure the success of Christianity and Anglicanism by the wealth of the church then TEC is wealthy and successful beyond all measure. However, to measure ministry by wealth is harmful and leads us into bad paths of power. The Global South resents not only our wealth but our tying our outreach to them to their accepting our vision of ordination and marriage.

So, are we better off measuring the success of Christianity and Anglicanism, whatever that is, by the number of members of a church? If so Africa is successful beyond all measure. However, to measure ministry by numbers is harmful and leads us into bad politics of power. The Western church resents the appeal to numbers and the Global South's insistence that it has the true Gospel because it has the numbers.

Lambeth seems intent upon accommodating Africa when it comes to LGBTQ issues but it doesn't want to alienate the wealthy church in America (and Wales, Scotland, Canada and New Zealand) so the Archbishop of Canterbury reaffirms a resolution from Lambeth in 1998 and he affirms that gay sex is a sin³⁴. Really! Despite the witness of a several western churches, the witness of the British society in which he lives, he chooses to say this?

² This may seem to be simply a matter of language but TEC has no explicit theology. We express what we believe in the BCP. If same-sex marriage is excluded from inclusion then it is less that heterosexual marriage.

³ Lower case *gay sex is a sin* is his phrasing.

⁴ On Saturday **The Living Church** posted the Global South's statement that the actions of the ABC are inadequate in addressing our heresy. They talk about the doctrine of the Anglican Communion. This doctrine exists more in their minds than in our reality. See: <https://livingchurch.org/2022/08/05/bishops-set-terms-for-sexuality-debate/>

While the vote on these issues has been eliminated, the call is for patience and moderation and respect for those who interpret the bible literally. Of course, those who interpret the bible literally are not actually reading the bible, they're reading their biases into it much as this country did and in many ways still does, read racial discrimination, into the bible.

What are we afraid of? We fear for the future of the church if we take these radical positions, I would say that they are faithful positions and not radical. We are foolish to fear. Our first reading from Genesis tells us of Abraham's fear. He had no heir and God had promised him that he would father a great nation. Actually as it turns out God had promised Sarah that she would mother a great nation, but that can wait for another day.

The words to Abraham are so profound that we repeat them in the second lesson from Hebrews. Here they are meant to give faith to a tiny, powerless, not yet a church, people who are wondering and wandering. Are they on the right path? How do we know we're on the right path?

This is Luke's issue. Can we be faithful when so many are asking us to compromise? Do we have faith in the Revelation of Christ Jesus and if so can we use it to challenge power and give our lives meaning?

I maintain that we have forgotten or lost how to be the church. For instance, too often what we look for in clergy or what we expect from the church as an institution is really simply a caring and healing community headed by an ordained social worker. When we hire clergy we first want to find someone who will minister to our needs, be kind to all of us, pray, visit the sick and the shut-ins. Furthermore he or she should preach without offending anyone and be endlessly understanding. I believe that these expectations have killed the church. None of them are based on scripture. None of them risk anything for the proclamation of the kingdom. They all elicit behavior that says the most important thing for the church to do is to endure. We need to do all that we can, we being clergy, to keep you in the pews so the building won't close under our stewardship. Above all we, the clergy, must be nice. As you can gather I have never been accused of being nice.

When I read the gospels and the epistles I do not find Jesus, as portrayed in them, or by Paul as he writes to the churches, much interested in saying the nice thing that will build up membership or keep marginal members involved. The church is not about existing to exist but for many churches that has become the whole point. When that happens we cease to be the church. We can be caring communities but we are not proclaiming the gospel.

My experience is that people like being part of something that's exciting and going someplace. This requires leadership.

Think about the gospels, not the Jesus loves me gospels, but the hard sayings of the gospels about what it means to be a follower of Christ. It means finding security only in following Christ. The church, as an institution lost that long ago and now finds security in endowments, property or as I sometimes say, an edifice complex⁵. Nowhere in the gospels does it say that an edifice is necessary, no need for a building, but frequently we let the building run the

⁵ I did not invent this phrase. I first heard it from Bp Ian Douglas when he was new in Conn.

mission rather than the mission looking for a way to be carried out. We are called to care for the least among us yet our budgets reflect that we really care for ourselves.

I have been in four different churches on Sunday this summer. In each I look at the financial reports to see if the way they spend their money tracks with what they say is their mission. I am usually disappointed, not surprised, but disappointed. Indeed recently a parishioner at another parish told me that I forgot that, like it says in the bible, charity begins at home⁶. He meant of course that congregations should give of their excess to the poor, not of their substance. I pointed out to him that not only does the bible not say this; it calls for the exact opposite. Our Elevator Speeches, our mission statements, and our slogans mean nothing if our financials don't reveal that we put our money where our faith is.

I preached a sermon this summer in a church looking for a new priest. I took the opportunity to challenge them to find someone who was committed to proclaiming the gospel and working with the poor. Several members of the Vestry agreed and brought up my sermon at a meeting and the Senior Warden said it was pie in the sky. They're a struggling parish and can't afford my lofty ideas. They're simply trying to keep the church open. That has to be enough. They've become a troubled nonprofit and not a church.

People are looking for meaning in their lives. I imagine that all of us are looking for meaning in our lives. People actually like being challenged if they know they're taken seriously. No one likes being made to feel like an idiot but most of us enjoy bumping up against new ideas that challenge us to grow.

Otherwise why are we here? Meditation, prayer, the Eucharist, music, pastoral care, pastoral offices, etc. are all important but they gain their meaning only if they equip us, not simply as individuals but as a community, to proclaim the gospel. I would suggest that as we move forward we need to focus more on proclaiming the gospel.

I have absolute confidence that we can make a unique and important difference to God's creation as we await the long delayed second coming. It is not inevitable that we will make this contribution but we have the people and resources to do something that will help others know that Jesus died for them, rose for them and cares for them and this makes life possible.

⁶ <https://melindacousins.com/2014/01/29/can-we-please-stop-saying-charity-begins-at-home/>

The first use of the phrase "Charity begins at home" in print is found in Thomas Browne's 1642 book *Religio Medici*. It is now quoted as if it was gospel truth, often by Christians, and it is surprising how many people claim it is biblical or "based" on the Bible. It's not.

In fact, my reading of Browne is that he is arguing *against* the saying. He uses it twice, in these two sentences:

- "Charity begins at home, is the voice of the World..."
- "That a man should lay down his life for his Friend, seems strange to vulgar affections, and such as confine themselves within that Worldly principle, Charity begins at home."

[Read it for yourself](#) and see what you think.

The Bible itself is pretty clear that we are called to love not just our family and our neighbors, but even our enemies. [Matt 5:44] The Old Testament laws laid a foundation for justice and generosity for the marginalized, including widows, orphans and foreigners. [e.g. Deut 15:7-11]

Returning to the opening line of this morning's Gospel. We are especially called not to be afraid. Luke's Gospel is full of references telling us not to be afraid starting in the birth narrative when the shepherds are told not to be afraid. So, be not afraid, dare to preach the Gospel as it has been given to us even if our leadership at Convention and at Lambeth compromises and says hurtful things that question the love Christ has for all of us, not simply for those of us who are straight.

The point is that we must focus on what the gospel says is crucial and not on metrics. Metrics are easy and we can do all the right things for church growth or stability and still fail at the gospel. Faith is easy too as long as we remember that we are called to be faithful, not successful.

The American Church, after many decades of dragging its feet, has accepted the Gospel call to love all of God's creation, regardless of sexuality, and to minister to all of God's creation, regardless of sexuality, as equal loved human beings for whom Christ died.

To return to the gospel this morning few of us, except monks and nuns, actually sell all of our possessions as Jesus mandates. We don't even hear how demanding Jesus is being in the gospel because we've heard it too many times. Or perhaps we believe that this made sense when there was a real expectation of the end of the world but no one seriously predicts it now. I think Jesus meant exactly what he said but at the very least he meant that we are to rely only on him. Everything else we rely on will pass away. He will endure. The challenge and gift to us is to live today daring to risk and hoping for the day when he will come again.