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Luke 12:35-40

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THE MASTER'S RETURN

SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

The new year brings new things: New Year's resolutions, new legislation, and a new season of *Downton Abbey*. Season 4 begins tonight on KQED. For the past several years first British then American audiences have been charmed by this series about the life of the Crawley family in their country estate. The series developed from the movie *Gosford Park* (2001), which depicted a similar world. Behind both lay the British TV series *Upstairs Downstairs*. If you have watched any of these you will know that the world of these grand country houses, of which there were so many in Britain in the early twentieth century, was divided into two realms. The master and his family upstairs were supported by a large number of servants downstairs. Among these servants there was a pecking order: in *Downton Abbey* from Daisy the kitchen maid at the bottom to Carson the butler at the top, with footmen, lady's maids, valets and the housekeeper in between. Problems arise in both *Downton Abbey* and *Gosford Park* when someone crosses from one realm into the other. The servants' only role is to sustain the life that goes on upstairs. They are visible and yet invisible: their presence is required for the functioning of life upstairs, yet this life goes on as if they are not really there, as if they are just part of the furniture.

As we return to Luke's gospel, after a break of six weeks for Advent and Christmas, we enter into a first century version of *Downton Abbey*. Through parables Jesus places us into the world of a master and his house, a house large enough to have multiple slaves of various ranks. The life of these slaves revolves around the master.

We resume our series at Luke 12:35, midway through a long speech by Jesus. We are in the section known as the Travel Narrative (9:51–19:44), in which Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, there to be rejected and killed. As he travels he is surrounded by three groups of people. The first group are the hostile scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus has so angered in his statements that they "began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say" (11:53–54). The second group is the curious crowd pressing around him; such a large crowd that they were trampling one another (12:1). The third group are the disciples who are struggling to make sense of what it means to follow Jesus on this journey to Jerusalem.

In 12:1–13:9 Jesus gives a long address to the disciples, with some asides to the crowd. He is instructing them about what it means to live life in the kingdom of God, what it means to follow Jesus. Addressing his disciples as "my friends" (12:4) and "little flock" (12:32), he tells them not to be afraid or anxious. Don't be afraid of hostile authorities, who can't do anything more serious than kill you! Don't be anxious about how to defend yourselves before these authorities, for the Holy Spirit will guide you in what to say. Don't be anxious about material aspects of this life, for God your Father knows what you need. Instead, seek God's kingdom.

We pick up Jesus' instruction to his disciples at verse 35.

"Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!" (Luke 12:35–38 ESV)

Following on from his previous commands, "Do not fear...do not be anxious...seek your Father's kingdom," Jesus gives another pair of imperatives: "Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning" (35). Each command employs a metaphor. KJV translates the first command, "Let your loins be girded about." In Jesus' day, and in some Middle Eastern cultures still today, people wore long, loose robes. These are good for keeping one cool but not for energetic activity. So a man would gather up his long robe and tuck it into a belt before starting any work; he would gird his loins. This is used metaphorically in both Testaments for preparation for action or service. In *Downton Abbey* the servants don't wear long robes but they still need to be properly attired for service, whether it be to appear at the front door to welcome a visitor or to serve dinner.

The second metaphor is of lamps. If someone arrives at our front door at night we simply turn on the light, but in the ancient world there were no such conveniences. Servants had to keep their oil lamps burning all night in case their service was required. The servant had to ensure he had enough oil and wick to keep the lamp burning all night.

Both metaphors express the same command: be ready for immediate service at all times, even in the middle of the night. What are these people to be ready for? With the word "like" Jesus tells a parable to elaborate. It is a parable in two stages (36, 37–38).

The first stage concerns men awaiting the return of their master who is away at a wedding banquet. The verse is arranged chiastically, though ESV obscures this by rearranging the clauses. A more literal rendering is:

- A like men waiting for their master
- B when he departs from the wedding feast,
- B' so that when he comes and knocks
- A' at once they may open the door to him.

The outer lines refer to the actions of the men, the inner pair to the actions of their master. The men expect their master to return. They know he will return when the wedding feast is over, but this could be a long time because wedding feasts were prolonged, as they still are today in many cultures. Finally the master breaks free from the feast, comes home and knocks on his own door. The men inside immediately open the door to him because they are prepared and expectant, with loins girded and lamps burning.

Whenever anyone arrives at Downton Abbey, no matter what time, servants are there to greet them. One of the servants in ancient houses of sufficient size was the doorkeeper. In Mark's parable of the doorkeeper a man going away on a journey commands the doorkeeper to stay awake (Mark 13:34), but here it is all the men who are waiting and who immediately open the door for the master.

The second stage of the parable (37-38) describes what happens after the master is home. This time *ESV*, unlike some other translations, preserves the chiasmic structure, but a little tweaking helps clarify:

- A Blessed are those servants
- B whom the master, when he *comes, finds* awake.
- C Truly, I say to you,
he will dress himself for service [gird himself]
- X and have them recline at table,
- C' and he will pass among them and serve them.
- B' Even if in the second or in the third watch,
he *comes* and *finds* them thus,
- A' blessed are those ones!"

In the AA' lines the men are now explicitly servants or slaves. The BB' lines describe the master coming and finding. In the B line he finds his servants awake; they are alert and watchful. In the B' line he finds them "thus," i.e. awake as *ESV* correctly elaborates; they are awake even though it is late into the night. The night was divided into three watches of four hours; the second watch began at 10 pm, the third at 2 am. Even if the master comes shortly before dawn, he still finds his servants alert and watchful.

What ought to happen when the master returns? We know the servants are alert and ready for service with loins girded and lamps burning. They would take his cloak, serve him some food and drink, a late supper. They would scurry around serving while the master relaxed. Imagine Downton Abbey when Lord Grantham returns home? The servants attend to his needs, then Carson inquires, "Will there be anything else, my lord?"

But that is not what happens! What happens is completely unexpected! In the central lines it is the master who acts, not the servants. He does three things, each unexpected. He girds his own loins even though all the servants are girded already. The master brings the servants into the dining hall but instead of him sitting down so they can serve him he makes them sit down at the table. This is not the long polished table of Downton Abbey. The table would be a U-shaped *triclinium*, raised a foot or so off the ground. Diners reclined on cushions or on couches around the three outer sides of the U. The servants would be familiar with this table: they would have frequently moved around such a table, serving the guests. But they would never have reclined at this table. But that is what the master does: he sits them down to recline at his table. Then he moves among them to serve them.

Imagine this scene at Downton Abbey: Lord Grantham puts on the footman's livery, seats all his staff at the long polished table, from Carson to Daisy, and then moves from one to the next, serving them dinner. It would never happen! But that's what the master in this parable does!

Jesus knows what the normal behavior would be. A few chapters later he says,

"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare

supper for me, and dress properly [gird yourself], and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink?'" (Luke 17:7-8)

Jesus turns the social order upside down. This is so startling that he introduces the master's actions by saying, "Truly, I say to you," as if to say, "I'm not kidding. This really is what is going to happen." What a great reversal! What a "costly demonstration of unexpected love"! No wonder the outer lines, AA', pronounce the servants "blessed." They are blessed to have a master such as this, one who serves them. They are blessed simply because their master found them watchful, not for what they have done. They haven't done anything except get ready, be watchful, then open the door for their master. The feast served by their master is a reward for their service, but that service is not here described as activity. It is an attitude of watchfulness for their master, a life orientation towards their master.

"Blessed" is a word we use often in Christian circles. By it we usually mean that life has gone the way we want it to go; we have received what we wanted; our expectations have been met. But "blessed" is really a declaration that life is headed in the right direction; it is a congratulation that one has chosen the right path. Yet just a few verses earlier Jesus has warned the disciples that they might be brought before rulers and authorities, and even killed—hardly what we would call a "blessed" life!

The master has sat his servants at his table, and moves among them, serving them. Obviously he serves them food and drink; he serves them a banquet because they are reclining at table. But where does this food and drink come from? I think it makes most sense that he has brought the food and drink with him from the banquet that he was attending. He wanted his servants to participate in that banquet. He could have sent a servant home with some food so the servants could eat in their quarters. Lord Grantham could have sent a hamper home with his valet for Carson to serve downstairs at the servants' table. But, no, the master himself broke away from the banquet. The phrase that *ESV* translates as "come home" (36) is actually "he left the banquet" or even "he broke away from the banquet," implying that the banquet was still going on. This is how I read it: while the banquet was in full swing the master came away, sat his servants at his own table, and personally served them food and drink from the banqueting table, thereby including them in the banquet.

This begs the question: What is the banquet? Luke's gospel is full of feasting and banquets. There are some significant connections between this banquet and three other banquets in Scripture, one of them in Luke. The first connection is with Passover. The first Passover was eaten in Egypt on the eve of the Hebrews' exodus from the land of slavery (Exod 12). It was eaten at night (12:8), with loins girded (12:11). That night was a night of watching (12:42). Subsequent Passover meals are eaten in a reclining position. If you have participated in a Passover seder, you may recall the Four Questions: "What makes this night different from all other nights?" The fourth question says, "On all nights we eat sitting upright or reclining, and on this night we all recline!"

Similarly the feast of this parable is eaten at night, during a night of watching, with loins girded, while reclining at table. Might this be a Passover meal, even a new Passover meal which would indicate a new exodus?

The second connection is to the Messianic Banquet, promised in Isaiah:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. (Isa
25:6)

The Lord himself would serve this banquet to his people in the age to come, the Messianic Age. This is the banquet Jesus foretells:

“People will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 13:29)

The third connection is to the Lord's Supper, commemorated in the eucharist. The Last Supper (22:14-38) was a Passover meal, eaten at night, while reclining. Just like in the parable it featured a great reversal. At this meal Jesus served the bread and the wine. His words of institution for the cup recall the covenant at Sinai after the exodus.

But still the disciples didn't understand the basic principles of Jesus and his kingdom. Immediately after the meal,

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest (22:24).

So Jesus laid out his *modus operandi*:

“For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” (22:27).

Nevertheless Jesus commends the disciples for sticking with him, even if they didn't understand:

“You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.” (22:28-30)

The disciples have faithfully followed Jesus to Jerusalem, even though they didn't understand much of what he was trying to teach them along the way. For simply following him faithfully Jesus will sit them at his table in the messianic banquet.

There is a lot to this little parable. Who is the parable really about? Many call it the parable of the watchful servants, placing the focus on what the servants do. But really it is about the master and what he does. We come away from the parable amazed at this master. What a master he is, one who seats his servants at his table and serves them a banquet. Blessed indeed are those servants who have such a master.

In v 39 Jesus gives a second parable to illustrate the command to be ready:

“But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into.” (12:39)

This brief parable is still about a house but the metaphor is different: a thief coming to break into the house. A thief doesn't call ahead to make an appointment or to say he is coming. He comes at an unexpected hour. In the first parable Jesus is the master but in v 39 he is the thief.

In v 40 Jesus gives the concluding moral to the whole paragraph: to the double command in v 35 and the two parables (36-38, 39):

“You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (12:40)

Tomorrow is Epiphany, from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, “manifestation” or “appearance.” The church remembers both the visit of the magi, whereby the baby Jesus was manifest to the Gentiles, and the baptism of Jesus, whereby he was manifest as the Son of God. We have just celebrated Advent, remembering the coming of Jesus. But we also await the return of Jesus, his second coming, when he will

again be manifest. He has appeared and he will appear again, as our Scripture reading (Acts 1:1-11) stated.

Jesus said even he did not know the hour or day of his coming but that hasn't stopped people trying to predict the week, month or year. Harold Camping, who died just a few weeks ago, did just this, predicting a week in September 1994. Later he became more specific, predicting first one day then another day in 2011. Most Christians are familiar with the metaphor of Jesus returning like a thief in the night. The metaphor is used several times in the NT. For example,

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (1 Thess 5:1-2)

This metaphor was popularized by the 70s movie *Like a Thief in the Night* featuring Larry Norman's song: “I wish we'd all been ready... There's no time to change your mind, the son has come and you've been left behind.” Unfortunately what has been left behind is the metaphor of Jesus slipping away from the banquet to sit us down at his table and serve us himself.

Because most people read the first parable as being about the watchful servants, they interpret it as a call to be busy about the master's service. There are other parables that deal with that but that is not what this parable is about. Jesus tells as much about the master as about the servants, as much about himself as about the disciples. The servants are simply to be expectant, watchful and ready for the master's return. It is the master who acts.

Jesus uses several key words. Disciples are to be expectant, watchful and prepared. What does it mean to be these three things?

Being expectant is a distinctive theme in Luke. Simeon “was waiting for the consolation of Israel” (2:25). Anna, after seeing the baby Jesus in the temple, spoke about him to “all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38), implying that she was among their number. Joseph of Arimathea “was looking for the kingdom of God” (23:51). The servants of this parable were waiting for their master to come away from the wedding banquet (12:36).

There is a big difference between expectation and expectancy, though both are forms of waiting. Expectation usually implies that we want God to fulfill our plans. Expectancy implies that we are confident that God is at work and will do something, though we don't know what it is. In the former we hope he will conform to our imagination. In the latter he often transcends our imagination. Simeon and Anna had their imagination transcended by a baby forty days old. Joseph had his imagination transcended by the body of a dead Messiah. The servants of the parable had their imagination transcended by the extravagant hospitality of a self-humbling master.

Watchful means to be awake, alert. Jesus rebukes the church in Sardis for its failure to be alert:

“Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.” (Rev 3:2-3)

The church in Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but it was dead. It had become complacent. It had forgotten that it was the church of the Lord Jesus. It had ceased to watch for Jesus, to have

a mindset orientated to Jesus. Jesus repeats the warning later in the book, this time with a beatitude to the one who is watchful:

“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake...” (Rev 16:15)

The name Gregory means “watchful” (Lat. *gregorius*, from the Gk. verb *gregoreō*). Beginning with Gregory the Great (590-604) it has been the second most popular name for popes, after John. The best way to be watchful is to live a life oriented onto Jesus, just as the servants lived their lives oriented onto their master. This is what Jesus has been telling his disciples in Luke 12. Don’t be afraid of the religious authorities; don’t be anxious about this life; don’t watch in that direction. Instead, seek God’s kingdom; watch him.

The coming of Jesus is a major motif in Revelation. In the prologue John exclaims,

Behold, he is coming with the clouds... Even so. Amen. (Rev 1:7)

In the epilogue Jesus himself affirms his coming:

He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20)

These two verses form the basis for the hymn sung as our offertory today, “Lo, He comes with clouds descending.” If we don’t respond, “Amen. Come Lord Jesus!” when we get to the end of the book then we haven’t read it correctly.

In the book of Revelation the followers of Jesus don’t have much power. They don’t do much other than “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4). Their work is simply to be loyal and devoted to the Lamb. This is what the servants in this parable are: they are loyal and devoted to their master, faithfully watching for him, expecting his return, and ready to open the door when he comes. It is then the master who does the work.

May God give us grace this year to be loyal and devoted servants, expectant and watchful. What a master we have!

1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 374.

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