

Title: What Are We to Make of This?

Date: 11/19/2023 (Advent 2, formerly known as Proper 28, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Zephaniah 1:7,12-18](#); [Psalm 90:1-8, \(9-11\), 12](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#); [Matthew 25:14-30](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/8SeC4tqxCos?t=1701>

In the words of the prophet Zephaniah,
[The great day of the Lord] will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom. (Zephaniah 1:15)

Please be seated.

Ummmm. Happy Thanksgiving? In their infinite wisdom, the people who designed this calendar of readings decided that these are the words we need to hear as the holiday season kicks off.

Maybe verses like “You sweep us away like a dream; we fade away suddenly like the grass” are there to remind us to cherish every precious moment we spend with family and friends. After all, life is short, and we don’t have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the journey with us.

But geez, verses like these don’t exactly lighten the *accumulated* weight of the year behind us and the *anticipated* weight of the year ahead of us. Whatever happened to “my yoke is easy and my burden is light?”

Then there’s today’s parable from the gospel according to Matthew. On one hand, it works very well for Commitment Sunday. As we make our financial pledge for 2024, and yes, that includes me and my husband, we are making a promise to each other to support this life that we share.

Everything that happens *at* St. Alban’s and *through* St. Alban’s happens because each of us finds our own way to show up for God and our neighbors. We trust that we are all in this together, that the burden is light because none of us is alone.

In church, we use the lingo of “time, talent and treasure” when we talk about giving. On this year’s pledge cards, the Episcopal Network for Stewardship reframes them as “wealth, wisdom, and works.” This change in language isn’t just about being clever; it invites us to shift our perspective.

“Treasure” is material. It’s the pile of gold and jewels that a dragon sits on. Yes, wealth is about money, too. It can **also** refer to a wealth of time, a wealth of skills, a wealth of creativity, a wealth of life experience. This invites us to expand our definition of the kind of abundance we have and can share.

“Time” is measured in minutes and hours. Talking about “works” shifts the focus to the *impact* of how we spend that time. It reminds us that when we talk about loving God

and neighbor, we're not just talking about feelings, we're talking about tangible words and deeds. Our prayers travel on this feedback loop between our hearts and minds and our hands and feet. We take the body of Christ, the bread of life, into ourselves and then out those doors.

"Talent" often translates into skills, but if you ask me what my talents are, I wouldn't know what to say.

There are things I like doing, but I wouldn't consider myself talented because other people are so much better. If you ask me for "wisdom," I *know* that I've made enough mistakes that I have plenty of cautionary tales to share. I'm also hopeful that I have the wisdom to know what I don't know...and when I need to ask for help.

Going from "time, talent and treasure" to "wealth, wisdom, and works" can help us take a deeper look at something we might see without really seeing. This invites us to re-examine a shorthand we've taken for granted. Signs, and even Sacraments, can grow stale if we sleepwalk, or in the case of worship, sleep talk, past them.

That's one reason our Sunday Morning liturgy changes from season to season. Moving from singing "Glory to God in the Highest" to "Lord have mercy" puts us in a different posture. In the Prayers of the People, the areas we pray for are the same, but by framing them with unfamiliar words, we might name people and places that might not have otherwise come to mind.

For Communion we pray Eucharistic Prayer B because it's best suited for the themes of Advent. The Word spoken through the prophets is placed next to the Word made flesh, and the pairing of the two prepares us to make that turn from error into truth, sin into righteousness, and death into life. And nothing anticipates the birth of Jesus quite like "For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world" (BCP 368).

Yet, in this season of Advent we aren't just preparing for Christmas Eve, for the birth of Jesus. We are preparing for the Second Coming of Christ. None of us knows what that will look like, even those who claim to know when and how it will happen.

However, we can't ignore the grim picture painted by the prophets.

From the prophet Amos, "Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light (Amos 5:18)."

That message is reinforced by the prophet Zephaniah. "Their wealth shall be plundered and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them" (Zeph 1:13).

Even Paul cautions, "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!" (1 Thess 5:3)

And today's parable ends with, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt 25:29-30)

This is the dark side of that parable. It's often used to highlight the importance of identifying and using our spiritual gifts, to remind people to let their light shine. But when we take it all the way to **this** conclusion, it hardly feels loving, or fair.

How can God be in favor of the rich growing richer and the poor growing poorer? How can God stand for the impoverished to be made even smaller and more invisible?

How can this be the same God who also calls for God's people to "[L]et justice to roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream"? (Amos 5:24)

Let's go back to the parable. The slave who received the one talent saw his master as harsh man, a man who reaps where he did not sow and gathers where he did not scatter seed. It is true that slaves do the work while their masters benefit. No one could call that system fair.

Yet, this master entrusted his property to these three slaves. One talent doesn't sound like much, but it's 6000 denarii,¹ or about *fifteen* years of wages for the average day laborer.² That's a lot of money. That's a lot of digging. This is not to mention that he had to find some way to support himself while his master was away, because he was so determined to return that exact same amount to his master.

This man acted out of fear. He flat out told his master, "I was afraid."

He didn't see any potential for abundance; he didn't see anything in this for him. If he traded and lost money, he'd be punished, and if he traded and made money, his master would take it all. Since he didn't see a way for him to come out ahead, he ended up doing even less than the bare minimum.

If sports announcers were narrating this parable, they would say that his problem was that he didn't play to win; he played to avoid losing, and so he lost.

Imagine being a slave who receives fifteen years of wages all at once. That's more money than he's ever seen or had. That much responsibility is a shock to the system; it's scary. It's not hard to understand why he would've stuck that money out of sight and blamed his master for limiting his options.

Looking at all that he was entrusted with, he could only see the potential to get it wrong; he couldn't see how he could trade it for more love, more light, more life. Likewise, it can be hard to know what to do with the abundance of love and forgiveness and grace from God. It's one thing to read about this and another to live as if we know the truth of this down to our very bones.

It's easier to envision punishing judgment than to fumble toward the kingdom of heaven. After all, the parables are less like road maps and more like abstract paintings. It's easier to see and walk the well-worn paths we know than to make a way out of no way. It's easier to operate within the framework we're used to than allow God to shift our paradigm and unsettle the ground under our feet and stumble toward a future without the certainty of knowing exactly what it is and what it means for us. And that's a **huge** risk.

- It's risky to love and to receive love, to forgive and feel forgiven, to believe that God can extend that much grace toward the things we've done and left undone.
- It's risky to allow ourselves to hope for something different, to believe there can be peace without weapons and prisons, to trust that we can all thrive while providing life-sustaining wages and benefits and caring for the limited resources of this earth.
- It's risky to go beyond binaries, to say we're on the side of peace without sounding like we don't stand for anything, to dive into nuance without using it becoming an excuse for our lack of action.

We can be afraid and become numb and fall asleep. Or we can be afraid and **still** put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope for salvation.

The prophets had this bleak vision of what was going to happen because they saw the direction people were headed in; they described reality as they saw it. But as Paul pointed out to the Thessalonians, that doesn't mean this story has to end in wrath, for God has destined us for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. And if we've learned anything from the Old Testament, it is that God remains faithful, even when the people of God go astray.

So, maybe these **are** the words that we need to hear at the end of one church year and the beginning of another.

We can live in anticipation of a judgment that is punishing, or a judgment that is eye-opening and course correcting. This can limit us, or liberate us. We can keep our wealth, wisdom and works to ourselves as security against ruin and devastation, darkness and gloom. Or we can share them in service of another reality, the kingdom of heaven we hope to see. May we live out the abundance we hope will come to be.

Amen.

¹ <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/talents>

² Lindsay P. Armstrong, "[Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 25:14–30](#)," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 309.