

Text: Luke 12: 32-40
Title: Here Comes the Judge
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Barbara Brown Taylor grew up in the south with an African-American nanny named Thelma. As Barbara remembers it Thelma didn't do much with the children; she sat in a rocking chair and read her King James Bible while the children played, but with an eyebrow raised over the top her Bible it was clear who was in charge.

One day Thelma gave the children paper and crayons and told them to draw a picture of their house ~ the big pillared porch, the old oak trees, the white picket fence. The children dove into their assignment; with great joy and great detail they drew their homestead. Then Thelma told them, "Now I want you to draw fire comin' down from the sky. Draw the fire lickin' up the oak trees and the picket fence and roof. Draw it that way 'cause that's what's gonna happen when da Lawrd comes back."

The children were dumbstruck.
They had no idea they were making a coloring book of the eschaton.

Barbara Brown Taylor has since come to realize that for Thelma the coming fire was a purifying fire that would set the world to rights.

What the children saw with fear she saw with hope.

What the children saw with terror she saw as divine judgment.

What the children saw as an end Thelma saw as a new beginning.

Dear friends, central to the Christian gospel is the claim that God is coming to judge humanity. There is an endpoint to history when God will return in Christ for an accounting. In the words of Flip Wilson, "Here comes the judge."

Now, some view that coming with trepidation,
some view that coming with agnostic indifference,
some view that coming with evangelical eagerness,
some view it with skepticism and some with great hopefulness.
But, to read scripture is to be confronted with the idea or image of a coming judgment.

So, how should we think it about it?
What would our eschatological coloring book look like?
How then should we live?

Our text is part of a larger exchange that Jesus has with his disciples. It is not part of a sermon for the masses, but it is directed toward Jesus' closest friends and followers. And the instructions are demanding and unsettling:

*Don't be afraid. Sell your possessions and give to the poor.
Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out.
Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning.
You must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect it.*

If Jesus is talking about a coming judgment the directives he provides are a steep order. There will be no spiritual lollygagging or moral complacency; the disciples of Jesus are called to be courageous, generous, and vigilant. They are to be faithful and fixed like servants waiting for their master, or as one watching for a thief to come in the night. There is little space for a lethargic, lackadaisical, or lukewarm life. Jesus calls his followers to a high standard.

And, as a follower of Jesus, I'm weary and worried just reading the words of Jesus. I have a hard-enough time preparing to pay my taxes and I know when those are due, how will I be adequately prepared for the coming of Jesus? Seriously....

What if I slip up or bog down in my own fears, concerns, and amusements? What if I haven't been faithful enough or good enough? What if I'm asleep at the wheel when Jesus comes calling?

With eternity hanging in the balance Jesus seems to be calling his followers to attention. There's a judgment coming, what if we're not ready? Seriously....

Well, I want to draw your attention to a crucial line in our text that slips by unnoticed. There is a remarkable claim that easily gets lost in the instructions that follow. Jesus says,

Don't be afraid, little flock, for our Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom....

Listen to it again with the verses that preceded it:

...do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

That claim is the groundwork for every instruction that comes after.

Rather than worrying about what we'll eat and what we'll wear, and rather than worrying that we'll be found fit and faithful, rather than being afraid that a grumpy or frugal deity is coming, Jesus says to his followers that the Father has already given them the kingdom. The verbs are past tense.

You've already been given fullness of life in God; you've already been given everything you need. Therefore, "don't be afraid." God eagerly wants the kingdom – a whole new set of affairs reflecting God's intentions for human flourishing – to take root in the real,

lived experiences of Jesus's followers. That's the desire of God's heart. And in turn you are free to seek after that flourishing.

There's a creative tension here.
Seek after what you already been given.

Early in our marriage when Sandi would leave for a few hours or a few days I operated out of my engrained patterns. I would leave dishes wherever I ate, leave clothes on the floor wherever I disrobed, leave empty bottles wherever I drank, and leave the bed unmade. You get the idea....

However, I soon learned that wasn't the home to which Sandi wanted to return. Therefore, being a quick learner, I changed my behavior and for years when she was gone, I would be my mostly-normal-lazy-messy-self and then minutes before I expected her arrival I would scurry around the house to clean, straighten, hide, organize and try to get everything back to some acceptable standard. Again, probably not the ideal, and there was always the risk that, like a thief in the night, she would get home before I was ready.

I have since learned that it is more loving to keep the house clean while she's gone. It makes better sense to pick up after myself in the moment of making a mess. It is better to behave as if she were home. It is an act of love and an expression of gratitude to keep the house clean. And I wait for her to come home in confidence and not fear, in joyful anticipation and not knotty anxiety.

And, dear friends, that seems like a lovely little image of how we could wait for the coming of God. Pick up after yourselves, give to others, don't be afraid....

But, the dilemma with that image is that the emphasis is still on what I was doing and the corresponding lesson is in what we're doing. And I want to be clear: the instructions that Jesus provides for how to wait for the coming of God do not swing on what we do, but on what God has already done in giving us the kingdom. How we wait is an expression of gratitude, or simply the natural extension of that kingdom....

And in that spirit, let me point to one more crucial implication.

When Jesus inaugurated his public ministry, he began with these words:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In doing so Jesus announced a social and economic reality wherein the patterns and norms of this world are flipped over. The status quo is stood on its head. In the coming of the kingdom Jesus says there is a great reversal.

And in light of that, it seems like no small thing that when Jesus calls his disciples to live (without fear or worry) into the patterns of that kingdom he speaks in economic terms.

Sell your possessions and give to the poor...

The Greek here is better translated as give alms, or almsgiving. It has the sense of giving with mercy, or solidarity. Listen to how Matt Skinner gets at it:

...it is also vital to note that Jesus is speaking about more than writing checks. According to him, “almsgiving” involves more than charity in a condescending or transactional way, in which the wealthy half give their excess to the poorer half. Rather, almsgiving is an expression of true solidarity with others. This is a solidarity that refuses to let inequalities stand, even if kind people might try to soften the razor-sharp edges of our economy’s systemic inequalities with their regular generosity. Jesus is not interested in correcting abuses or disadvantages that tend to pop up in the current world order. His vision is much more radical – in the sense of elemental – than that.

That is to say that Jesus is talking about different order of things. This is a movement away from the economic anxiety that permeates our lives. (See “provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out.”) And, this is movement toward a dependence on God that would in enact nothing less than “a reversal of the world as it is presently known and legitimized.”

In other words, Jesus calls us away from a world in which some people survive only because more privileged people chose to act morally from time to time. Jesus has in mind, instead, a different world, a different kingdom. Almsgiving isn’t simply about offerings that help those with less money; it is also about sharing power and privilege. It’s about a solidarity that reflects a new reality.

Dear friends, I don’t know how to get there. I don’t know how to shake the accoutrements of an upper-middle class life and the support for all sorts of ministries that affords, but my hunch is that Jesus has something more in mind than merely maintaining a way of being that benefits the few at the expense of the many. It is hard to believe that the vast chasms of inequality are the will of God, or a reflection of the kingdom.

And, maybe Barbara Brown Taylor’s nanny was right: when the judgement comes there will be a putting to rights. So, let us live with a forward lean – grateful that it is the will of the Father to give us the kingdom. Therefore, don’t be afraid.

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.