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[Psalm 33:12-22](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=274#psalm_oth_reading)

[Hebrews 11:1-3](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=274#epistle_reading)

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A LIVING FAITH Sermon for August 11, 2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Many years ago, back in the footloose days, I was living in Oregon, and I was looking for someplace to spend the winter, so I decided to try to find a house or apartment to rent someplace on the Oregon coast.  I placed an ad in a little Pennysaver kind of newspaper that served some of the small towns on the coast, and sure enough, someone got in touch with me.  This individual and his family had a small beach house in a little town called Bandon. That was actually right on the beach there, and that they would not be using during the winter.  Would I be interested?

Long story short, I rented the cabin sight unseen and spent the winter there.  Even today, I’m amazed they were willing to rent their place to a total stranger with no background check or anything like that; and still more amazed they agreed to it once I showed up in person and they got a look at this scruffy young vagabond at their door.  But that’s exactly what happened.

Anyway, it turned out that their trust was not very well placed, because I pretty much laid waste to the place during those winter months, and it all came home to roost when a got a call a few weeks before I had anticipated their return, and they said they had to come back early to take care of some business.  Early like in two days.

I don’t think I ever spent a more frantic forty-eight hours in my life, and I hope to never again.  Mopping floors, hauling bags full of wine bottles to the local landfill, doing furniture repair, and all the time rehearsing various apologies for the broken window and the rips in the rain gear and the scuffs on the walls and the broken bed slats and the cigarette burns on the kitchen table…to mention just a few.

By the time they pulled into the driveway, I was basically a quivering mess of anxiety and self-pity and guilt.  I was basically ready to carve out a pound of my own flesh and hand it to them if they demanded it.

The amazing thing was that, when they came in and looked around the house, they didn’t say a thing about the damage.  And even when I tried to apologize, they just basically waved it all away and were as nice as can be.

But even so, that was and remains to this day the most powerful lesson I ever received in not waiting until the last minute.

Our gospel passage for today seems to share that concern:

*12:35 "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;*we are told, and: *12:36 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.*

Here and in many other places, several of them also in the twelfth chapter of Luke, Jesus emphasizes the urgency of his message. He makes the point over and over that it is of the utmost importance that his listeners began today, now, to take his message to heart.

Many of the early Christian writers like Luke, writing decades after Christ's death, since Jesus had not yet fulfilled their expectation of a second coming, a return from heaven to complete the plan of salvation, took these recorded sayings of Jesus and interpreted them to be about being prepared for that second coming. Sometimes they even explicitly added something to the original saying to bolster that determination. So the final verse of our selection for today reads: *You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour*, although that was almost certainly not part of what Jesus actually said.

What Jesus was being urgent about was not that people should get their lives in order after he had been crucified, resurrected, and had returned to heaven, so that they would be prepared for his eventual return, whenever that might be.

*12:32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.
12:33 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.
12:34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

This is all instruction for ordering your life, and it is not urgent because Jesus might descend from the clouds and the world might end at any moment and you be rushed to judgment. That is not how his hearers would have taken it, and neither should we. Jesus is certainly filled with urgency, but he is urgent because it is the one and only way of preparing to lead the life of heaven, to find value in the things heaven values, and to lose interest in the things that heaven will not offer you.

Every human life has two ages. There is the present age, and there is the age to come. The present age is the life spent here on earth; the age to come is the life spent in heaven. The instruction Jesus offers is how to conduct ourselves in the present age in order to prepare ourselves for the age to come.

I have a little dog that many of you have met. Her name is Bitsy, and she has a lovable characteristic that I'm sure the others here who have or have had dogs will recognize. Bitsy will eat anything I eat. Whatever's left on my plate – animal, vegetable, or mineral – Bitsy will eat with at least as much gusto as she does her own dog food.

Now as many of you also know, my cooking habits tend to be – let's say – experimental, so that Bitsy ends up eating many things that most people wouldn't even dream of eating, probably wouldn't even give to their dogs, as the saying goes. But I would, and the reason it doesn't concern me is because I know that dogs, like humans are omnivorous. What doesn't kill me won't kill Bitsy, and she can in fact get sustenance from it just as well as I can.

Cats are different. Cats are strictly carnivorous, so that even if one of our cats might be persuaded to eat my non-meat food, the cat wouldn't get any sustenance from it.

If a cat were suddenly to wake up in a world where there were all sorts of delicious things – doughnuts and ice cream and squash and spaghetti with pesto sauce – but there was no meat, the cat would slowly starve to death. Surrounded by delicious abundance, the cat would go hungry.

Think of all of us as cats, and think of Jesus as the great physician who is going to change our very nature in such a way that we might enjoy the bounty of a meatless world, and you begin to get the idea of what Jesus was doing.

To human natures that find their sustenance and reward in dominating others, in being envied or feared, in frivolous and harmful pastimes, in prestige and honors and self-publicity, heaven will seem as unwelcome an inheritance as a world of fruit and honey would to a cat.

This church adheres to a belief in the universal salvation of all humankind. All God's children go to heaven. But that doesn't mean that all God's children will find heaven an equally agreeable place to live. That will depend on the condition of the soul when it passes through the Pearly Gates.

What Christ accomplished through His resurrection and ascension was to prove the reality of the Kingdom of God, of the spiritual world where God reigns. What Christ came to teach was how, in this material world, to live lives that grasp and acknowledge what that spiritual reality means for us.

 Christ wasn't just looking for belief, whatever exactly that is. He wasn't just looking for people who could give the correct answer to a question. (Do you believe in God? Sure do! Great, you get an A. Do you believe in the Ten Commandments? Absolutely. Wonderful! Go to the head of the class). Christ wasn’t looking for beliefs, he was looking for lives lived in ever increasing conformity to the reality of God.

And that I think that explains the source of Christ's urgency. The belief in God is not like the belief that Abe Lincoln was once the president or that men have walked on the moon. If we truly believe in an infinitely knowing, infinitely concerned God, and that God loves each of us the way a mother loves her child and yet also, because of that very love, desires for our own eternal benefit that we conform our lives to God's own nature, then surely that belief would color every action of our lives, that every single thing we do, think, feel and say would be informed by that belief.

At the beginning of Chapter Twelve, before launching into his series of illustrations and examples, Christ is quite explicit about the vital importance of what he is telling his followers:

*"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, you are all of more value than many sparrows.(vv 4-7)*

This remark about the hairs of your head being numbered is sometimes explained as showing God's loving concern for us, but I don't think so, not in this context, where Christ has just told us whom to fear. His point **here** is not that God loves us - although obviously He does make that point in many other places. His point here is that God is watching us, always. There is nothing about us of which God is not aware, nothing we do or say that is not of interest and concern to our loving Father.

What is the application of this to us? Well that will vary, of course, from Christian to Christian. Christ doesn't give us sets of specific rules; he gives us a yardstick by which we can measure ourselves. To what extent does the conscious awareness of the reality of God's presence illuminate and influence the various elements of our daily lives? To what degree do we consult with God in making our decisions, whether large or small? How conscientiously do we express our gratitude to, how openly do we confess our failures before, how sharply do we experience our separation from Our Father when we disobey or go astray or harden our hearts against His love. These are things no one can judge for us, but which, as Christians, we must judge for ourselves. This is the beam we must acknowledge and remove from our own eyes. And the sooner the better.

And so, gracious God, our prayer for this morning is that You open our hearts as well as our minds to Your own reality. Make Your abiding presence known to us in the secret depths of our souls, where words fail and the intellect never reaches. Fill the wellsprings of our wills with the living water of Your Spirit and Your love. And we ask this in Jesus' name.