

“The Unexpected Hour”:  
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)  
on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2010 (Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Luke 12: 35-40

Let’s start with a word...a really big word. The word I have in mind is the word eschatology. Eschatology!

Like many of the key words we use in theological conversation, it’s a word that comes to us courtesy of the Greeks. It combines the Greek word “eschaton”—which means the “last” or “final” things—with the Greek word “logos”—a word with a wide range of meanings including such meanings as “teaching” or “doctrine”. And so “eschatology” is any teaching or doctrine that concerns the last things, with Christian eschatology attempting to define the essence of the specifically Christian teachings about the last things. Let’s be clear on those definitions at the outset, since they are highly relevant to this morning’s proceedings...including the fact...

...including the fact that I was, a couple of weeks ago, winding my way through a short book of essays by this man: Professor Thomas G. Long who teaches at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.<sup>i</sup> The final essay in the thin volume I was reading looked at the whole question of eschatology, in particular the fact that eschatological themes, generally speaking, don’t play an especially prominent role in the life of most mainline Protestant churches. That struck Thomas Long as odd...

...especially in light of this fact, namely...

...namely that such preaching would have played a significant role in these same mainline Protestant churches back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century! As Long puts it: “Among educated clergy in the churches we have come to call “mainline,” the language of heaven, hell, Christ’s coming reign, and the final judgment were recurring and important topics of sermons in the nineteenth century, but by the close of the twentieth century a veil of embarrassment had been thrown over the whole matter.”<sup>ii</sup>

Indeed, as Long goes on to suggest: “Preachers in 1850 spoke eloquently and frequently about the consummation of history in the return of Jesus Christ...but they would have blushed at the [mere] mention of sex. Today many preachers are willing to discuss life’s fleshier problems with the frankness of Jerry Springer, but the prospect of preaching a sermon on the second coming or judgment day chills the blood.”<sup>iii</sup>

And the bottom line is simply this. I was so impressed with Tom Long’s essay that I resolved to draw upon his insights the very next time the lectionary threw an undeniably eschatological passage in our direction. Lo and behold, my wait was a short one. I made that resolution some 2 weeks ago. Three or four days later, I turned to this morning’s lectionary passages and there we were: New Testament eschatology at its

boldest and its bravest, on display for anyone with eyes with which to see and ears with which to hear.

*Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit!*

*Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he draws near!*

*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.*

*Be ready! The Son of Man! Coming! Coming at an unexpected hour!*

What are we to make of such rhetoric? How are we—some 2000 years after the fact—sophisticated, worldly people that we are—a people still waiting for the Son of Man's return—to deal with such notions, with such exhortations?

Let me begin with what is, for me, a foundational assumption. I approach New Testament texts such as this one with the assumption that they reflect, with a fair degree of accuracy, the preaching and the teaching of the historical Jesus. And let me be honest about the fact that I am wading into some fairly controversial waters when I make that statement. For well over 100 years now, one of the most basic disagreements in the field of research into the historical Jesus concerns texts such as this morning's. Was Jesus himself an apocalyptic preacher: one given to pronouncements concerning the final things? Or was it the early church that subtly turned Jesus in that direction, long after his death and resurrection?

New Testament scholars line up on both sides of that question: as they do with most questions! Many argue that Jesus himself would not have been likely to prophesy the coming of the Son of Man, but others argue that such themes are too pervasive in the New Testament for them to be the invention of anyone other than Jesus. At the end of the day, I find that second approach far more persuasive: which simply means that I have no choice—even when they leave me flummoxed—but to take at face value, and with considerable seriousness, texts such as the one that has been placed before us this morning. And yet...and yet!

Having noted the fact that eschatological themes are to be found throughout the New Testament—including on the lips of Jesus—it's also important to notice that those themes often provide the background (rather than the foreground) to the texts in question. Yes, it's true: Jesus (like Paul) is not above making use of eschatological themes to drive his point home. But his goal is not to provide information to his hearers; he's not interested in their being able to write a detail laden textbook about the end-times, complete with time-tables and illustrations!. God forbid! And so, when asked, Jesus will characteristically tell his questioner that he, himself, has no idea as to when the end-time will take place. He never doubts its coming, but he refuses to dwell on it

for long! Far from handing out a road-map to the end-time, let alone producing a string of end-time novels, Jesus appears to have a far more practical goal in mind. And it's here—I think—that we can begin to understand why it is so wrong-headed for us (preachers and their willing victims alike!) to permit the eschatology of the New Testament to fall by the wayside.

The key word, I think, is the word “urgency”. Urgency! Whenever the Jesus of Mark, Matthew and Luke speaks in an eschatological vein, his over-riding goal appears to be that inculcating a sense of urgent readiness into the hearts and minds of his hearers.

*Be dressed for **action** and have your lamps **lit!***

*Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds **alert** when he draws near!*

*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.*

You see: whatever Jesus' is attempting to do with his choice of words on a morning such as this, the one thing he most certainly cannot be accused of providing for us is a leisurely Cook's tour of the “eschatological lowlands”. On the contrary! The clear goal of Jesus' language—his very choice of words and images—is to impart not a set of facts but a style of discipleship rooted in a keen sense of alertness. Indeed!

If one studies the history of early Christian spirituality, say as it developed over the first 4 or 5 centuries after the death of Christ, it's hard to miss the extent to which the great spiritual masters emphasized in their teaching the virtue of “wakefulness”—spiritual alertness—as the key...as the **key** Christian spiritual virtue. For all of our profound philosophical and theological differences, is it possible that Christian spiritual practice—understood as a quest for spiritual wakefulness—is not really (at the end of the day) all that different from Buddhist spiritual practice—understood as a quest for mindfulness? Worth pondering, I think.

Beyond that?

Well...if a large measure of the challenge of a text such as this is the challenge of shaking the sleep out of our eyes...the challenge of embracing with enthusiasm (embracing with a sense of urgency!) the opportunities that come to us today (since today really and truly might be our last day)....if that represents the central challenge of such a text, the further challenge may have to do with the subtle hope such a text seeks to impart. If you are seeking to locate a key manifestation of such hope within this morning's reading, ponder the powerful image of the master who returns not to be waited upon by his servants, but who returns in order to wait upon his servants. Think of Jesus washing the disciples' feet on the night before his death for a concrete image

of that sort of role reversal. But frankly, frankly, the sort of hope I'm thinking about this morning runs deeper than any one image can even begin to capture.

And I realize, I realize only too well, that the word "hope"—along with the words "faith" and "love"—I realize that the word "hope" is often overused and drained of its power by just such overuse. So cautious have we grown concerning hope, that we tend—as Thomas Long points out in his essay—we tend to be clearer as to the things we hope *won't* happen than we are vis a vis the things we might (were we less jaded) dare to imagine just might happen. "I hope the stock market doesn't crash! I hope I don't go into a vegetative state and die in a nursing home. I hope we don't have another 9/11".<sup>iv</sup> Such "negative" hopes are entirely understandable, and yet they don't begin to touch the more positive hope to which we are called as followers of Christ.

Try this on for size.

Imagine if half-way through the viewing of a film, you're interrupted by a phone call from a friend, who (upon learning that you are watching said film) asks you whether it is any good. And, of course, you can respond by saying: "Yes, I'm enjoying it immensely," or perhaps by saying: "Actually, I'm glad you phoned, because it's perfectly dreadful and I won't be turning it back on!" But if the film in question is one that has begun to grip you, and if it deals with serious themes and sympathetic characters, probably the most accurate response you can make to your friend is to say: "You know, I am enjoying the film *so far*...but I won't really know what I think of it, until I've watched it through to the end, and see how the screen-writer and director tie up all the loose ends." At which point, you're entitled to hang up and go back to your viewing!

Here's my point! The ultimate meaning of a good story (whether that story is found in the pages of a novel or in the images of a film)...the ultimate meaning of that story is not at all clear until the final word or image has made its imprint on our consciousness. And the same is true of life itself. And here, let me be as blunt as the bluntest of atheists.

If this world's story has no ending or a vengeful hate-filled ending, then I will have no choice but to conclude that we were wrong to worship in this place Sunday by Sunday; that the God we worship here is no-god at all, since the God we worship has promised to be not only the God of our beginnings but (more importantly) the God of our endings. Whatever else brings us to this place, surely it is the conviction that the God we are here to worship is actively involved in weaving our lives into a rich tapestry: a tapestry in which even the most troubling, problematic events, will eventually be turned toward the good, toward the right, toward the truth. And that, you see, is *the* definition of Christian hope: not merely that the future will unveil a better day, but more to the point: that the future will help us to make sense of all that we have done and all that we have been. To live with hope, you see, is to live with the conviction that the end will be good indeed...that the end will justify not only the beginning, but everything that is permitted to happen in between.

Toward the end of his essay on eschatology, Tom Long tells the story of Rabbi Hugo Gryn, one of Great Britain's most respected rabbis. As a young lad, Gryn—who was born in Czechoslovakia—endured the Nazi era in Europe. Despite the dangers and the hardships involved, however, Hugo's father made a point of observing all of the Jewish festivals, including weekly observance of the Sabbath. Hugo was especially struck by a time, during that era, when his father—on the Sabbath—would take a string, place the string in a bit of butter, and light the buttered string to make a candle for the Sabbath. One time, Hugo was furious and protested: "Father, that is all the butter we have." To which Hugo's father replied: "Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope."

Friends in Christ: as those who live in a world which—far too often—wreaks of Good Friday, surely we of all people know how vital it is for us to see that world through an Easter lens: through a lens uniquely crafted to remind us that even the most obscene of atrocities—even the death of God's beloved on a Cross—is not beyond the redemptive power of the Almighty.

And so let us resolve, once again, to live in the hope that is ours...with the joyful urgency of those who have seen the face of the risen Christ...with the joyful, purposeful urgency of those who await his return.

May it be so! In Jesus' name!! Amen!!

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

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