

You Must Be Ready
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Emmanuel Episcopal Church

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"You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

You know, whenever I see this verse, one of the first things that pops into my mind is a cartoon figure with long scraggly hair and an unkempt beard, wearing a rough-spun robe, standing on a street corner, holding up a sign that says "The End is Nigh!"

Or, if I'm being a little more serious, I connect it to the parable we heard from Jesus in last week's gospel, when God says to the rich man who tore down his barns to build bigger ones for all his goods, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you."

At first glance, Jesus' statement that the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour hits us as a reference to the End — either the end of the world or the end of our lives — and the whole verse comes off as a dire warning, a kind of holy scare-tactic, to get us to straighten up and fly right *now*, before it is too late.

But I don't think Jesus really uses scare-tactics. I don't think this verse is a *warning* so much as it is an *encouragement*. I don't think the point here is *fear* so much as it is *faith*.

Jesus says "Be ready." But then look at how he describes what "being ready" is like: "Be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet," Jesus says, "so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks." The way Jesus describes it, "being ready" is *not* being anxious or worrying about what's going to happen next. It is *not* running around frantically trying to get everything done — or just trying to look busy — before an angry taskmaster comes for inspection. Being ready *is* being dressed and having your lamps lit and being alert. It *is* paying attention to what is going on around you. It

is being fully available to step up and take part in what is there to be done.

And the *reason* for being ready, according to Jesus, is to open the door for the master. Not out of fear of being judged for not opening the door fast enough, or not doing your tasks well enough, or not impressing the master enough. But the reason you're ready to open the door, Jesus says, is because you *want* to see the master. You are *looking forward* to greeting the master. You enjoy the company of the master, so much so that the master "will fasten his belt and have you sit down to eat, and he will come and serve you." The reason to be ready to open the door for the master is not fear of punishment, but faith in the joy the master brings.

And that's why Jesus says "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." The Reign of God — the active, present fulfillment of God's purposes of justice and peace and joy and love, in this world, here and now — that Reign is already under way. It is far from complete of course; there's a lot in the world that is not justice and peace and joy and love; but the work toward those ends is already going on. And it God's good pleasure, Jesus says, to make us, little flock though we be, to make *us* part of that work. And it is a blessing for us to be alert to moments of that work when they come.

And that's why I think Jesus' saying "You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" is about more than just the End. I think it's a saying about the Now. I think Jesus is encouraging us to be alert for those unexpected moments when we can act out God's purposes of justice and peace and joy and love right here, in our ordinary lives, in our daily activities, opening up the door to let the Spirit of Jesus come in, and bring us to the table, and work through us to build up community and communion in all the things we do.

I think "You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" is a *promise* that Jesus will be with us whenever we are alert enough to see him.

And I think it is that promise that in turn sets us free to do the work of God's Kingdom without fear.

And I wonder if we are not coming to such an unexpected hour in our national life right now. Just over a week ago, there were mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton. And I am a little bit ashamed and a little bit angry to tell you all that when I first heard about it my first response was, "Well, that's just what happens these days." There have been so *many* mass shootings in the USA in recent years it seems my grief, my outrage, my will to do anything, have just kind of evaporated. Things like this have come to seem normal to me.

Things like this should never seem normal.

And in the last few days I've been seeing responses in the news that are also not normal. Along with the usual "thoughts and prayers," and hand-wringing, and defense of the Second Amendment, and blaming "mental illness," and eventual inaction, I've been reading some different things. An op-ed from a conservative saying that, if conservatives want to keep their guns, they'd better start taking mass shootings more seriously. Bipartisan support for "red flag laws" that would remove weapons from people who show signs of being on the verge of violence. A piece in the *News Leader* pointing out that substantial percentages of Virginia-dwelling, red-voting gun owners support sane and common-sense gun laws, and should start telling their legislators that's what they want. I wonder if we might not finally be at some sort of tipping point, when attitudes toward guns and violence in this country might really be ready to change.

And I wonder if this a moment when Christians, who are alert and ready and waiting to open the door for Jesus, might have something to say in the gun-law debate. As followers of the Prince of Peace — some of whom enjoy target shooting for sport, or hunting for food, or gun collecting as a hobby, but who are *all* committed to a gospel of Peace — I wonder if we don't have an obligation to put our voices into this conversation. Whatever your support or opposition to guns in general, surely as Christians we can agree that the killing must stop, and that we

all must work together to find ways to stop the killing. Will we be ready to set aside our fear and open up that door?

And of course unexpected hours come to us in far less public and political ways as well. Sometimes Jesus knocks on the door in a very personal way.

I'm sure that most of you know I am retiring as Rector of Trinity Church, and that my wife Lee and I will be leaving Staunton about the middle of next month.

And while I have understandably spent most of my time and effort and energy at Trinity, I want you all to know that Emmanuel has been an important part of my experience of ministry here in Staunton.

Emmanuel and Trinity have shared in many projects and programs and youth activities and worship services and ecumenical outreaches and interfaith connections — and I think Trinity has grown spiritually from that connection. I know I have grown spiritually from that connection! And I hope Emmanuel has grown spiritually from that connection, too.

And now God is calling me into something else. I don't yet know what that's going to be like. A number of retired persons have told me that retirement is not what they expected — and I've not always been sure whether they think that's a good thing or a bad thing. So I expect my expectations will not be completely confirmed in the event, either. But I believe that Jesus has promised to be with me whenever I'm alert enough to see him — and if I'm ready to open the door, he will most certainly knock.

And I think Jesus has promised that for you, too. You know that times of transition can be challenging in ministry. That's something Emmanuel has gone through more recently than Trinity. And it often happens that clergy transitions have an effect not just in the parish changing clerics, but on the whole area ministry as well. So I think Emmanuel also has a role in what happens next for Trinity and the Episcopal Church in Staunton.

I invite you therefore to walk with your sister parish Trinity through her transition time. Continue to work with Trinity in the ways you've already been doing. Support and encourage Trinity members if they seem anxious about their search. Welcome their interim Rector, and in time their new Rector, and help them feel as valued in ministry as you have helped me to feel. Be ready for new initiatives in how our two congregations can be one in mission in the name of Jesus in this place. Step into the future of our local church, unafraid, because you know Jesus has promised to be with us whenever we're alert enough to see him.

Jesus said, "You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Let us help each other be ready, and let us expect Jesus with joy at every hour. Amen.