"Buried"

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Scriptures: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10; Matthew 25:14-30

When I was growing up, one of the weird toys that I had, this is going to date me, was a tape player in the shape of a robot called 2XL.[1] The cool thing about this toy is that it was not just a tape player, you actually interacted with the tapes. The robot had four buttons on it that would tell the special tapes that were made for the toy to play different parts depending on what button you pressed. So some tapes were trivia questions that you could answer. But what I really loved to do was the choose your own adventure stories. These were tapes that took you through a narrative and had you make choices and the outcome of the story changed based on what you chose. With some parameters, you got to be the story-teller.

Eventually, I put together which choices led to which endings and I could predict the things that would happen before I heard them. If I wanted Brainiac to defeat Superman and take over the world, I could make that happen. If I wanted the Man of Steel to emerge triumphant, I knew how to get that ending too.

In a world that has so much we can't control, we often want to hear stories that end the way we expect them to. It's November 15th. The Hallmark movies are coming, if they haven't started already. But I would argue that it is often those stories that

[1] If you are curious: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2-XL

don't go the way we expect or would have wanted them too that teach us and grow us the most.

I mention all of this because our Gospel reading for today, a parable that Jesus shares of his coming Kingdom, is one that, had I written it, would have ended differently. Now I am not right, but it is something I find myself feeling almost anytime I hear this parable. Like with my 2XL Robot, I want to determine the outcome of the story. What I want is for Jesus to say that there was a fourth servant, let's say he was given three talents. Let's say he wanted to do right by his master and he did invest it. But despite his sincerity, his execution is lacking and he makes bad investments, loses it all. I want the master to comfort and commend the best efforts and true intentions of this imagined fourth servant.

But what we want Jesus to say and what he does say are not always the same thing. It turns out that Jesus knows more about the Kingdom of God than I do, and if I have indeed committed to following him, his version of events is the one that counts. So let us draw closer to this parable that makes me uncomfortable and see what our Lord is trying to teach us in it.

This is Jesus' second parable in a row focused on his return, the second of three pictures he gives of what God's judgement will look like at the end of all things, delivered here at the end of his ministry in Matthew's Gospel. This is Matthew 25, Matthew 26 is the Last Supper and Jesus' arrest. Time is running short. Last week was the parable of the ten virgins, five with the good sense to be prepared for the coming bridegroom, five less wise and left out of the wedding feast.

This time, the focus zooms in a little bit from general preparedness to responsibility. The master of three servants goes away and entrusts to them his property. His money, quite a lot of money, is split up, not evenly, between three servants. The servants with five and two talents get to work, and return a 100% profit for him when he returns. The third servant is scared from the start of what might befall him, and in true Greek-tragedy form, his effort to avoid the wrath of his master is the very thing that leads him into it. He buries his master's treasure into the ground, and this gets him sent out from his master's presence.

A couple things I want to look at with this parable - first - the master leaves and entrusts *his property* to his servants. Who remembers the first time they drove mom and dad's car by themselves? Who remembers the first time they got a ding on a rental car? To be ready for our Master's return, we have to recapture what Paul expresses this way to the Corinthian church: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price."[2] I think we are pretty good at realizing in the church that what we have - our money, our talents, our time - are gifts from God, but are we as clear that our very lives are gifts from him to be offered back in thanksgiving and worship? The master entrusts what is his to his servants for a time. But he is returning.

The next thing we should acknowledge about the text is that all three servants are not gifted to the same degree. This is simply true to life, especially by the world's measurements. Some of us are more gifted in terms of talent and skill than others. Some will have well-known and prosperous ministries. Some will have quieter stories of a more modest scale. We can't let jealousy get in the way of faithful service. Particularly in an age of good deeds only counting if we post about them on social

[2] 1 Cor 6:19b-20a

media, it would be so easy to give up on doing what God asks of us because we don't feel like we are accomplishing what we see others accomplishing. The opportunity for faithfulness is no less at the one talent level than it is at the five talent level. What we have to avoid is burying our one talent because we get jealous of the one who has five. What is the task to which God has called you? However big or small it may seem to you, will you do the task well?

Two thirds of the servants do well! They are ready for the task. They understand the worth of what they have been given and what they can do with it. They trade and double the money. For this they receive their master's praise and rewards.

What does it mean for us to take what God has given to us and invest it faithfully? First, we have to be ready. Someone starting a business who doesn't want to pay attention to the balance sheet is in for a rude awakening. Paul writes to the Thessalonian church in our epistle reading for today about the need to stay awake and ready for Christ's coming. His words seem to fit almost as a commentary on the parables of Jesus in Matthew 25: "So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."[3]

What Paul is getting at for the Thessalonian Christians, who may have been getting a little antsy for Jesus' return, is that while they do not know the time that Christ will return, they do know what they need to be doing when he returns. This is the thrust of the New Testament's word on this. We seem to have become obsessed in our day

[3] 1 Thess 5:6-8

with the timing of Jesus' return where what the New Testament spends the most time worried about is the sort of people we are and the sort of work we are doing when Christ does return.

Do you think that if the master in the parable would have returned twice as quickly as he did, and the first servant had only made two and a half additional talents, that the master would have been any less pleased with him or any less upset with the servant who buried the one talent in the ground? Of course not. It is not about the when, but about our readiness - today, tomorrow, and for as many tomorrows as we have left. This is pretty easy to connect with anyone who has trained for any sort of athletic competition or sport. If you are not ready with your preparation through practice, you will not be ready for the game.

If these servants with two and five talents represent for us the way of faithfulness in light of our belief that the Lord is returning and we will give an account for how we spent our lives, what is the way of unfaithfulness that we should avoid?

We will get to the third servant in just a moment, but I do want to touch on our reading from Zephaniah today. Zephaniah spoke a word of judgement to the Kingdom of Judah, a word of judgement that would come to fruition in the conquest of the Babylonians. Our brief text today highlights a particular form of blindness in light of God's coming judgement, namely the belief that God doesn't actually care about our righteousness or unrighteousness and that his judgement is not something we should be anticipating. Before the scathing word of the harshness of God's judgement on the people for their sins, hear the type of person Zephaniah calls out. Zephaniah 1:12 (and following) reads:

“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
    and I will punish the men
who are complacent,
    those who say in their hearts,
‘The Lord will not do good,
    nor will he do ill.’
Their goods 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.”

We need to resist the temptation, in a largely unmystified age, that God is no longer watching or caring about what goes on in his world. We cannot afford to take God lightly, to pretend he is apathetic about what we say and do. Do not be the complacent one who thinks God to be indifferent towards injustice and unrighteousness.

Let’s turn now to the servant that the master calls wicked and lazy. Where does he go wrong? Look beginning in Matthew 25:24: “He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’” “I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” This point is emphasized in the

master's rebuke of the servant, whom he calls *wicked* and *slothful* in our ESV translation. The word translated here as *slothful* carries with it the connotation of hesitancy and fear, the reluctance to act on account of being afraid of what that act could put in motion.[4]

The complacent man in Zephaniah is a reminder for us of the dangers of not fearing God. The third servant is a reminder for us that fearing God is not enough. We must trust him. This gets me back to how I would end this story. A fourth servant, who tries and fails and is received by the master with love. I think my desire for this addition comes from the same sort of fear that caused the third servant to bury his talent in the ground. I don't always believe that God can deliver with what I offer up to him. Maybe I feel like I have been given less than others. Maybe I fear my own fallibility and sinfulness and don't think God can overcome it. Maybe I fear that the powers that be will take away what I have with nothing to show for it and that God will not show up.

But when I am thinking that way, I am using the world's metrics for success. I'm not trusting in the God who gives manna in the wilderness and turns five loaves and two fish into a feast.

So whatever way the story you find yourself in is heading at the moment, don't hide what God has given you in the ground. Not only is he powerful enough to make things grow in dry places, he is good enough to let you take part in that process.

[4] See Keener, Craig. *Matthew*. Matthew 25:26.

So in closing today I am going to give you some odd advice. Be like an ostrich. Ostriches are on my mind a little bit more often lately. We got a host of them at the Knoxville Zoo and we've gone to see them a few times. They are really interesting creatures. But man, I did not expect them to smell as bad as they do!

But with all the talk of burying talents in the ground in my preparation this week, I found myself wondering about that characterization of ostriches - that when danger is near, they bury their heads in the sand. Is that really true? Apparently it is not. Ostriches get that reputation because of a couple things they do. When danger is near and there is not a chance to escape, they get low to the ground in an attempt to hide. And with a body that looks a lot like a type of bush that grows in the desert, that makes sense. But the other reason that you might see an ostrich looking like its head was in the ground is especially interesting: they are caring for their eggs that they place in shallow holes in the ground.[5] So an ostrich is likely not hiding out of fear when you see it with its head in the ground. It is tending to the gift that it has been given, perhaps insignificant to the world but precious to the ostrich.

So when life's story takes a turn you wouldn't have written, don't bury what you have been given in the ground. Don't start comparing the number of talents that others have been given to what you've got. Don't let your fear of God keep you from trusting and following him. Tend to what you have been given and trust God for the results. Jesus is coming, and he longs to tell us all, "Well done."

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[5] https://www.clevelandzoosociety.org/z/2020/03/11/truth-or-tail-do-ostriches-really-bury-their-head-in-the-sand-when-scared-or-frightened