

A couple of months ago, my oldest, most trusted friend texted me out of the blue. Her 10 year old daughter had asked her how there are two explanations for how things were made, the Bible's creation story and evolution, and she wanted to hear my thoughts. Thoughtfully, she added, "no pressure." I responded that science tells us how things are made and the Bible tells us why.

And I think both "how" and "why" are very important considerations, both deserving our thoughtfulness and intentionality. For several weeks now, the readings have become more overtly focused on the end times in general and "readiness" in particular. We're sufficiently familiar with readiness that we can accept this. But readiness can only mean something if one is ready for something, or someone, specific. If our church were ready for Christmas on Good Friday, or vice versa, that would be unfortunate.

Today's Gospel should make us think about not just how we are supposed to be getting ready, but just as importantly, why. And if we can figure out who or what we're getting ready for, we'll know why. We might easily jump to the conclusion that the master represents God. Now, the master acts in a most unloving way toward the third servant, but you could argue that between the servant's actions and his antagonistic remarks to the master, the servant brought his punishment on himself. A stronger argument would be that God sometimes acts, or seemingly fails to act, in ways we don't like or don't understand, and Scripture does us a service by portraying God in ways that are difficult for us to accept.

But I do not think the master is meant to represent God. One reason is God might tell us to change, or to try again, but God never responds to our failures by shoving us away. That would be a failure on God's part, for God's desire is to be united with us perfectly and always. This desire, this love, is stronger than our capacity for sin and error. God is like this towards us despite knowing our flaws better than we do.

Another reason is that in the parable, the master went away for "a long time," but Matthew's Gospel emphasizes God's ongoing nearness. Matthew goes out of his way to quote Isaiah 7:14 in his account of the birth of Jesus, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," and then goes on to explain that Emmanuel means "God is with us." Matthew is the one who points out that Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." And if there was any lingering question about the point of his Gospel, Matthew ends it with Jesus saying, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

So who is the master? This parable doesn't come with a summary or explanation. Jesus doesn't even tell us what the parable is a metaphor for. He begins the parable simply by saying, "It is as if..." Clearly Jesus did not take a preaching class from the seminary professor who taught me! She emphasized that we should avoid the word "it" in general when we preach, but especially when we are talking about anything important. Fortunately, the third servant's antagonistic words give us a clue. In Jesus's

place and time, who were “harsh, reaping where [they] did not sow, and gathering where [they] did not scatter seed”? Who were extracting as much wealth as they could, and rewarding the people who helped them to do so? Who were acting like absentee landlords, yet cracking down on dissenters? The Romans, of course.

For reasons that should be obvious, I’m never comfortable when the Bible talks about slaves. I’ve often pointed out that in the New Testament, the Greek word *doulos* can be translated as either “slave” or “servant,” and wouldn’t it be nicer if the translators had chosen the latter? But in this case, I think the word “slave” is more appropriate, because the ordinary people living under Roman occupation were not free to pursue any meaningful change. They were stuck with an unenviable choice: complicity or death. Not really a choice at all.

But we, thank God, do have a choice. We are free to love, serve, and follow God in some pretty radical ways. And the ways most of us are called to love, serve, and follow God aren’t considered radical in our society, but normative, or at most, eccentric. Being here in Advent Church today means we have decided, at least in principle, to serve God. I say “in principle” because serving the world can be awfully tempting sometimes. Until we remember that our other options are like the master in one way or another. And even the most faithful Christians don’t get it right all the time. Fortunately, God is not like the master in this parable.

So why was Zephaniah describing God acting in such a harsh way? Zephaniah wrote to urge the people of God to change their ways. They had been only too ready to worship false, foreign deities, assuming that God didn’t matter. Bear in mind that what we heard came from the opening to Zephaniah’s book, which he intended to shock the people out of their complacency, like an ancient winemaker who had to decant wine into storage containers so that the dregs of the fermentation process would not cause the wine to spoil. The end of his book is a hopeful, uplifting vision. The goal was to prevent terrible things from happening, not to present doom as inevitable.

So, while our decision on how to use what God has given us is not one we should make based on fear, our decision certainly does matter, to us and to the world. God has not entrusted us with the large ancient units of currency Jesus described, about 80 pounds of silver each. God has given us something more valuable. Our treasure is our selves. We may choose to invest ourselves in Christ, his church, and his mission to make disciples of all nations, and be multiplied, or we can choose to bury ourselves in all manner of distractions, and then wonder why we are disappointed. The better connected to Christ we are, the better our lives are. Therefore, inviting other people into relationship with Christ is the greatest service we can do them, the greatest investment we and they could make.

At our annual meeting, we’ll have the opportunity to consider the progress we have already made toward making our congregation a welcoming, nurturing, and effective worshipping community, and consider how each of us might invest ourselves in

order to secure our progress and build upon it. Because while Jesus did not come out and explain the purpose of this parable, he did explain the purpose of his movement, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” We know who and why. I hope and pray that each of us will choose to be how.