

- The third lesson is from the gospel according to Saint Luke, chapter 12 and verses 32 through 40. The holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, as it is recorded in the gospel according to Saint Luke, Chapter 12, in verses 32 to 40. Listen now for this portion of God's word. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourself that do not wear out. An unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Be dressed for action, and have your lamps lit. 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. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them, so blessed are those slaves. But know this, if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house and let it be broken into. You also must be ready. For the son of man is coming at an unexpected hour. This is the word of the Lord.

(congregation murmurs) Let us pray. Come now Holy Spirit, with all of your quickening power. Grant us ears that we might hear spiritual truths, and be empowered to walk into them. Amen. Our gospel lection for today falls hot on the heels of the parable of the rich fool. And Jesus' discussion with the disciples about all the things which consume us. All of those things which seem so important to us. On last Sunday, we were reminded of the foolishness of our own desire, and how we are caught up in an endless cycle of consumption and desires that lead us to a depth of longing that God alone can satisfy. But don't take will too seriously. It was just more of his foolishness. So this morning, in the splendor and majesty of this place, I want for us to reflect on matters that are not quite so weighty, lighthearted matters. Pardon my indelicate curiosity, chalk it up to my age and newness here, you know, too young to know any better, too new to care. But allow me to ask a question. What are you living for? What matters most to you? What do you treasure? I'm living for my family and for their future, says one. I don't know, says another, I just want to be happy. I want some meaning and fulfillment in my life. A third says, life's too short, you've got to go for the gusto. So which will it be? A career or a family? The additional degree, or the marriage? The winter home, or the summer place in the Hamptons? What do you mean which will it be? We want it all! And so with that, the rat race begins, and we run and run, and run, until at last, we fall exhausted, wearied and worn of our own foolishness. We are those who have a love and passion for things intellectual. We plan strategically and create initiatives for waters yet uncharted. We watch for and analyze trends and patterns of things to come, yet fail to comprehend that our very lives are being poured out before us, and lived in the presence, care and eternal keeping of almighty God. Yet we live as if that reality doesn't matter at all. You and I just can't help it, we're good, honest, hard-working people who spend two thirds of our waking hours making a living, but not having a life. Don't we live as though our lives were dependent upon ourselves? We, who love to boast of self-reliance, of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We who love to lay claim to the Protestant work ethic stand in polar opposition to a gracious God who says to us cast your cares upon me, for I care for thee. It's just the American way, and therefore the Christian way of life to worry about all of that stuff. So again I ask, what are you living for? Are you living for the kingdom of God? Or are you living as if the

kingdom doesn't matter at all? If you are wearied by the endless rat race, and you would like to walk away from the endless maze, then hear the good news. We are free to live as a people of the promise. Hear the word of exhortation from the gospel. Fear not, our lives do not rest upon so precarious a foundation. Self-reliance is not a prerequisite for discipleship. You need not worry about your life, what you shall eat or drink or wear. Do not be afraid, little flock. For it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Not just the things of the earth, but the full measure of salvation and creation itself. Of course, you know what the trouble is with all of this, don't you? The gospel doesn't sound like good news to us, when we've spent all of our energy and being striving after all that life has to offer, we are confronted with the good news of the gospel. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourself that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near, and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. You call that good news? For people who can't get enough, it feels more like an iron fist in a velvet glove. The good news is that not only do we not have to run the rat race, we don't even have to enter the maze. Do not keep striving for what you are to eat, what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is nations of the world that strive after all these things, Luke says earlier in his gospel, for your Father knows that you need them. Strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. And since these are not matters that matter, is there something worthy of our lives' devotion and attention? There is this urgent word in the gospel for today. It is a word to a church which has become both custodian and companion of the status quo. It is a word to a church who speaks elegantly of ethics and ethos, but finds itself embarrassingly esoteric when engaging in things essential and eternal. Luke's word is prepare. Prepare. Be vigilant, keep watch, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. This is a matter that matters. This word first reminds us that we are to be prepared. What kind of preparation do we demonstrate on a spiritual plain for the coming of the Son of Man? The nation of Israel's entire history was for the purpose of being ready for the Messiah's initiating of the kingdom of God. Yet the people of Israel failed to recognize him. They were not prepared. Abraham in the epistle lesson is exalted as a model of faith, for he set out confidently in faith, not knowing where he was going, but certain that his journey of faith would lead him to a heavenly country. Abraham understood that which mattered most was not care for the human needs, but rather matters of the human heart. He was prepared and responded when the call of God came. What is this business about being dressed for action, of having your lamps lit, of being 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 knock all about? It is about being prepared. In the Palestinian culture of Jesus' day, the role of the bridesmaid was simply to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom. Whenever he arrived, the bridesmaid would quickly move into the procession to escort the bride and groom to the wedding festivities. These festivities might last an entire week. There would be feasting and dancing and singing. It was the highlight of the social life in Palestine. No one wanted to miss it. There was no specific time at which the bridegroom would come. The bridesmaid simply had to prepare for his coming at any moment. Notice the irony in the text. For their faithfulness in preparing themselves, the entire order of the day gets turned inside out. At the return of the master, it is the slave who is exalted to the position of host. Who is served by the master. This is good news to those of lowly estate. Those who are invisible in our society, to incoming first year students even, you have a place of honor at the table. In the words of our choir, children, don't get weary till your work is done, Christian journey soon be over. The time is drawing nigh. One of my most vivid memories of my experience as a Boy Scout was when our Troop 119 went on a camping trip to Camp Barstow. We were nearing the time for the Boy Scout Jamboree, and our troop wanted to have some unique

display for the event. A number of the scouts in the troop decided we should do a wildlife exhibit. We wanted to be able to describe how certain animals lived in the wild, what their habits were, and what they ate. It was our plan to capture a few creatures from the woods and display them at the Jamboree, and later turn them loose. And while on the camping trip, we hunted for wildlife. We were successful in finding a turtle and a lizard, a chipmunk, but I wanted to find a snake. Now when you're a Boy Scout, there's something kind of exciting about snakes. There's the danger of them, and they cause mothers and sisters to shiver in delight. Boys like that, you know. Our troop scoured the woods for a couple of hours. Then all of a sudden, several of us saw one slithering across some rocks in our path. This was my big opportunity. I had seen on television how one could grab a snake behind its head and hold it securely in one's hand and be in no danger. I was prepared to go into action, or so I thought. We recognized that this was a black snake, and I sneaked up behind him, ready to put into practice the techniques that I had learned on television. I grabbed him near his head. I thought he was mine. However, this clever little rascal slithered through my grip, turned its head, and bit me on the back of my hand. This was not the way it was supposed to happen. The man on television hadn't gotten bitten. In my fear and surprise, I threw the snake down. Actually, I think I cursed him too. God may have cursed him first, but I think I cursed him best.

(audience laughs) Not surprisingly, he got away, and we had no black snake at the Jamboree that year. Now I was not hurt from the snake bite. Although my pride was bruised. You see, the motto of a Boy Scout is be prepared. The truth is, I was not prepared. I should have used a snare to hold the snake, and brought along a bag to put him in. I had not made adequate preparation, and so I lost my big opportunity, and was a failure at my first and last occasion to be a member of the snake-handling church. (audience laughs) A Boy Scout is prepared. He is prepared by acquiring knowledge from the experiences of woods that will prepare him to handle a particular situation when it really counted. So too it must be for us. A Christian's duty is to live one's entire life prepared to give an accounting to Christ. It is both doing and being. Finally, Luke's gospel also speaks to us about remaining expectant. Are you expectant that the Son of Man will come? Is preparing for the coming of the Son of Man a way of life for you, or are you living as if today were the first day in the kingdom? Ask any child in Duke Chapel this morning about when his or her birthday is coming. A child who knows his birthday is near is exceedingly expectant. There is the assurance that soon his or her special day will arrive. There will be gifts and celebration, cake and ice cream. The prisoner of war who remains confident that his country is making every effort to secure his release is expectant. Anticipating his ultimate freedom, certain that that day will come. Even though we are not sure of the hour of the coming of the Son of Man, rest assured the hour will come. Perhaps Jesus is saying to us through this word that God's kingdom is sure. No one knows the day or the hour of the fulfillment of the kingdom, but just as surely as day follows night, the kingdom will come. Therefore, we should live with that kind of expectancy, confident that the will of God will ultimately prevail. Do we watch as diligently for the unexpected hour of the coming of the Son of Man as we do the rise and fall of Wall Street's market? Do we hang on every word of the kingdom's founder as we do on the words of Alan Greenspan? You and I resolve to be alert to God's presence. And then sleep through the challenges set before us. One day, a boy was watching a holy man praying on the banks of the river in India. When the holy man completed his prayer, the boy went over and asked him, will you teach me to pray? The holy man studied the boy's face carefully. Then he gripped the boy's head in his hands, and plunged it forcefully into the water. The boy struggled frantically, trying to free himself in order to breathe. Finally, the holy man released his hold, and when the boy was able to get his breath, he gasped, "What did you do that for?" The holy man said, "I just gave you your first lesson." "What

do you mean," asked the astonished boy. "Well," said the holy man, "When you long to pray "As much as you longed to breathe "When your head was underwater, "Only then will I be able to teach you how to pray." Do we long for the coming of the Son of Man with that sort of passion? Or do we wistfully reflect upon its arrival with a sort of seasoned indifference? A colleague in ministry says that if you really want to know how to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man, take a lesson from a dog. Any good dog listens expectantly for his master's return. And when in his presence, leaps into his arms with reckless abandon. Sons and daughters of God, our task is to live for the matters which truly matter. God help us do no less. Amen. (liturgical organ music) (choral music)

- You may be seated. The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. God of wisdom and righteousness, we gather in your presence aware of the vastness of your world and of the intimacy of your concern for us. Your love encompasses our largest dreams and our smallest fears. You have sent us forth with a message to proclaim. Give us the courage and the compassion to reach out to our sisters and brothers around the world in love that the gospel might be revealed not only through our words, but through our lives. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for all who live in the midst of terror or violence, where innocent lives are sacrificed for political gain. We pray for places where power is abused, and the dispossessed bear the heaviest burdens, where extremes of wealth and poverty are bitterly divisive, where even religion produces enmity rather than reconciliation. Especially we pray for those victims of the recent bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. We thank you for their lives, and ask that in the wake of such unspeakable tragedy, you would grant us a renewed determination to nurture a spirit of forbearance and respect, rather than hatred and distrust among the peoples of the earth. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for the leaders of the nations, and those whose words and actions will influence events in our world. That they may not tolerate injustice, seek refuge in violence, or make ill-considered decisions about the futures of other people. Grant them the wisdom and the strength to become genuine peacemakers. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for all who cry out for healing, that you will give patience, courage and faith to all who are disabled by injury or sickness. That you will comfort those who endure continual pain, pouring upon them the healing balm of your Holy Spirit. That you will grant fearless trust in you to all who are stricken with chronic or terminal illness. Console those who are bereaved after the loss of a loved one. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for all whose increasing years bring them weakness, distress or isolation. Provide for them homes of dignity and peace, give them understanding helpers, and the willingness to accept help. Draw their families closer to them, and deliver faithful friends to their side. And as their strength diminishes, increase their faith and trust in you. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for the children of the world, and for their parents, teachers and caretakers. Protect those who have been traumatized. Reassure those who are alone or afraid. Provide for those who are hungry or homeless. Restore to fullness of life those who are fragile or vulnerable in any way. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for the ministry of Kenneth Nelson. We offer thanks for the many gifts you have bestowed upon him, and his commitment to serve the church. And pray that you will continue to pour out your grace upon him and all whom he ministers to. Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer. Everliving God, as Abraham stepped out with assurance, not knowing where he was to go, may we

likewise venture forth by the light of your promise. As Sarah received your promise of a miraculous birth, may we bear within us the hope that in Christ, all things are possible. Keep the lamp of your goodness burning brightly within us, as a sign of our constant desire to welcome the coming of your kingdom. If the candle of our faith has grown dim, trim our wicks and ignite us anew. If our worship is half-hearted, startle us with your grace, that we may regain a heart full of thanksgiving. If our confession is insincere, purify our motives and set us aright, that we may love and serve you with all that you have given us. These things we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, amen. And now let us present the offerings of our life and our labor unto the Lord with thanksgiving. (liturgical organ music) (joyful choral music) (cheerful organ music) ♪ Praise God, from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise Him, all creatures here below ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Praise Him above, ye heavenly host ♪ ♪ Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪

- Oh eternal God, giver of all good gifts, we have been all too eager in our lives to pay back evil for evil, and slow to pay back your goodness to us. Yet you have summoned us to live by loss, to gain by giving, leaving all as we await the coming of your kingdom. Receive these gifts as an outpouring of our gratitude, as we join in singing praise to your holy name, pure and strong, with all the heavenly chorus. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray with confidence Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever, amen. ("Amazing Grace") ♪ Amazing grace ♪ ♪ How sweet the sound ♪ ♪ That saved a wretch like me ♪ ♪ I once was lost ♪ ♪ But now am found ♪ ♪ T'was blind but now I see ♪ ♪ T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear ♪ ♪ And Grace, my fears relieved ♪ ♪ How precious did that grace appear ♪ ♪ The hour I first believed ♪ ♪ Through many dangers, toils and snares ♪ ♪ We have already come ♪ ♪ T'was grace that brought us safe thus far ♪ ♪ And grace will lead us home ♪ ♪ When we've been there ten thousand years ♪ ♪ Bright shining as the sun ♪ ♪ We've no less days to sing God's praise ♪ ♪ Than when we first begun ♪

- Go forth from this place to love and to serve God and your neighbor. Be vigilant. Keep watch. Be aware of the coming of the Son of Man. And may you know God's grace and peace in all that you do and say now and forevermore. Amen.