

**Texts: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30**

**Here we go again – have you heard of Planet Nibiru? According to Fox News, it is a hypothetical planet on the far outer edges of our solar system. It was supposed to collide with earth on September 23, but that date came and went with no apocalypse. Now the claim is that today will be the end of the world as we know it, as this imaginary planet gets close enough to the earth’s gravitational field to throw it off, resulting in worldwide earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The hype is so great that NASA has even had to make a statement saying that Nibiru doesn’t exist, which makes the conspiracy theorists even more insistent that a cover-up is taking place.**

**Our readings this morning begin with Zephaniah’s description of the Day of the Lord as a day of wrath, plunder, and anguish. The gospel reading ends with weeping and gnashing of teeth. What do you think? Is the world coming to an end?**

**Paul wrote his letter to a struggling community in the Greek city of Thessalonika. These new Christians were anxiously waiting for the day of the Lord, the day when Christ would come again. Paul wrote to remind them that it was not yet time. Paul warns them that there is still more conflict ahead. But he also tells them who they are: they are the children of the light, children of the day. They are beloved by the Lord. They are destined not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through Jesus Christ. But right now, they are living in the in-between times, still waiting for Christ to come and gather them. Who they were is behind them. Who they are to be, risen with Christ, is yet to come.**

**Two thousand years later, we are still living in the in-between times, in between Jesus’ first appearance and his second. Even Jesus himself said that the Son of Man does not know the day or the hour. Yet it’s part of human nature to want to be in control of**

**things, so many, many people have tried to determine when the day of the Lord, the day of judgment will take place. All through history, people have tried to read Biblical meaning into world politics and natural disasters. Have any of those predictions come true? No. And I am going to go out on a limb here and say that it isn't going to happen today, either.**

**But even though we don't have a time line, we do have instructions from Paul for how to live in this in-between time. Encourage one another and build up each other. Put on the armor of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. In other words, build a community of love, support and hope. We belong to the day, Paul writes. The day of the Lord will come, but suddenly, like a thief in the night. Stay alert. We live in the light of Christ, not in the darkness of sin.**

**“When will the end come?” is not the question. The key question is: “What do we do while we wait?”**

**The answer that Jesus gives in his parable this morning is meant to shake us up a little, to make us uncomfortable. A wealthy man, going on a journey, summons his slaves and entrusts each of them with some of his property. Each of the first two workers takes the assets he has been given and through wise use, doubles the amount he originally started with. The third worker, however, does not. In fact, he hides the money away, buries it in a hole.**

**When the master returns, each of the slaves gives an accounting of his work. The first two are rewarded for the profits they have made and invited to “enter into the joy of their master.” But the third one was fearful. He didn't want to lose any of his master's money, so he didn't. He gives it back with a full accounting: “here you have back what is yours.”**

**Too often, this parable is used to justify a kind of “slot machine” theology – put your coin in the slot and God will guarantee riches. There are any number of Sunday morning TV preachers who will promise you just that – Your Best Life Ever! Or that you can Claim Your Victory Today! It actually might have been a better story if the first two slaves had not been so wildly successful in their investing. Face it – we are dazzled by the prospect of doubling our money, right?**

**But the focus of the story is not the first two slaves. They are just the set-up. The focus of the story is on the third guy, the one who is so paralyzed by his fear that he doesn’t dare to do anything.**

**He assumes that his master is a harsh and severe man. And all too often that is the view we have of God – unforgiving, punitive, wanting only to judge us. But the story itself doesn’t follow that assumption.**

**There is something about the extravagance of all of this. In Jesus’ day, a talent was a huge amount of money. It was the equivalent of 15 years worth of wages. So think of the wealthy man as a venture capitalist, and imagine that he gives \$3.7 million to the first worker, \$1.5 million to the second, and \$750, 000 to the third. All of a sudden, we begin to understand what is at stake here.**

**This parable is not about wealth management. It’s not about prudently contributing to your IRA or taking out a life insurance policy. It’s not even about the merits of capitalism vs. the trade-based economy of Jesus’ day. None of that. This parable is about living without fear. The first two slaves were able to step out in faith, take a risk and do mighty things with the talents they were given. The third slave isn’t able to do that. He**

**admits that he is fearful of the master, fearful of the power that the master wields. His fearful response to being given one talent is to go and bury it in the ground.**

**What would have happened if one of the first two slaves had invested in a high-risk venture and failed? Lost all the money? Let us not forget that when Jesus tells this parable, he is two days away from his own death. He is about to risk it all and lose it all. We know the rest of the story, don't we? The Son of God betrayed, denied, tortured and nailed to a cross.**

**We also know that the cross is not the end of the story. We know that Jesus rose from the dead so that we could have life, fearless and generous and abundant life.**

**The stories Jesus tells, and the stories that the Gospels tell about Jesus, are filled with extravagant sums. A farmer sows his seed on good soil as well as on bad and it yields 30, 60 and 100 times what was sown. A couple of fish and five loaves of bread are enough to feed 5,000 people. So when we hear of a wealthy man entrusting slaves with a fortune, we shouldn't be surprised. God's gifts are abundant and generous.**

**And God's gifts are meant to be used courageously. Each of us is gifted with talents and resources that we are called to use for the kingdom of God. Take the risk. And when you do, you just might find that those resources multiply beyond your imagining.**

**Today marks the conclusion of our stewardship emphasis. Just like the slaves who were entrusted with their master's wealth, it's about living without fear. It's about living in generosity. It's about your money *and* your life. It's about what you do with the gifts that God has given to you. In a few minutes you will be invited to bring your commitments forward. A few minutes later, Jesus Christ himself will invite you to his feasting table. And later this week we will gather with family and friends around a different feasting**

**table, to give thanks for all that we have been given. Everything that we are and everything that we do reflects the light of Christ. We are children of the light and children of the day.**

**So take a risk. Do something courageous with what God has given you. The world is not going to end today. There is work to be done.**

**We live our lives together in between the day of our baptism and the day when we will be risen with Christ. When we gather around the altar to share in Christ's body and blood, we gather with all who have gone before us. The Thessalonians and all who have traveled this journey of faith are right here beside us. We live in the light of Christ. In the age to come, we will enter into the joy of our Master. In that hope, we look to the resurrection... and the life of the world to come.**