

Proper 14 C
Luke 12:32-40
August 10, 2025

“A Thief in the Night”
The Rev. Dr. Brandon Perrine

³² *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

³⁵ *“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night or near dawn and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.*

³⁹ *“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”*

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You may have read or heard the story of Terrence Dickinson as it made the rounds on the internet and social media a couple of years back. If you did, you’ll remember that Dickinson was a burglar and he broke into a Pennsylvania home when the owners were out. Unfortunately for Dickinson, he was not a particularly good burglar and he found himself locked in the home’s garage...for eight days! During that time, Dickinson subsisted on dog food. When the homeowners finally returned and found

him, Dickinson was arrested. However, he turned around and sued the very people he tried to rob for mental anguish and was awarded a \$500,000 settlement.

Does this story boil your blood, just a little? It's meant to! It's meant to spark anger (or at least a few eye rolls) among those who believe ours is an overly litigious society. However, like so many stories of this [kind], there's one big hole [in] it: it's not true at all!¹

Riffing on a similar theme, we hear Jesus preaching vigilance in our text from Luke's gospel. "Sell your possessions and give alms," he urges, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit," he implores, "so the master finds you alert when he returns and serves you." "Be ready," he intreats, "if the homeowner had known when the thief would strike, she never would have left." And then he concludes: "for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." His words are foreboding, aren't they? They play on the audience's paranoia and insecurities. And they leave us wondering if our own affairs are in order, if we should sleep in our clothes with the lights on, and if our security systems are really up to the task of defending our homes! They're meant to. He does it on purpose. His words are intended to unsettle, unnerve, and alarm us. They're meant to agitate us to action.

When I was a kid, Sunday nights in our Southern Baptist Church were dedicated to all things related to the moment Jesus was describing: the Second Coming, the Day of Judgement, the End Times, the Rapture and Tribulation. Looking back on it, I think the minister knew that such conversations wouldn't really fly with the Sunday morning crowd and were better left for the true faithful that returned for the evening service. It was there that I first viewed the 1972 film "A Thief in the Night" and its three sequels. Thief follows the story of Patty who wakes to discover

¹ "Burglar Sues Homeowner and Wins." Brockmaninjurylawyer.com, March 20, 2024: <https://brockmaninjurylawyer.com/2024/03/20/burglar-sues-homeowner-and-wins/>.

that her husband has been raptured and she is alone. The UN takes control and forces everyone to receive a mark in order to buy or sell goods. The systematic persecution of Christians unfolds and everyone who refuses the mark is executed. Poor Patty dies on a guillotine, but she never accepts Jesus. It is the stuff of nightmares and I had many, but I don't think this is the response Jesus was looking for when he preached vigilance. So, what *was* he after?

I think he left us a clue in the opening line: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to *give* you the kingdom." Typically, we don't need to prepare much to receive a gift. And while we may wish we'd prepared for a gift-giver, they usually don't withhold their intended from us if we're not properly dressed and the house isn't in order when they arrive. While the gift may be precious to us, we rarely obsess about protecting it from potential burglars. We're usually more interested in enjoying and appreciating the gift. After all, that's what the giver wants, isn't it — for us to appreciate and use and enjoy the thing being given? Jesus is giving mixed messages. And maybe that's the point.

Jesus *is* giving mixed messages. Because spiritual wisdom is like that — not always wrapped neatly with a bow. It startles us. It stirs us. It disrupts our comfortable rhythms. It asks us where our treasure is — not just in terms of what we own, but in terms of what we value. What do we hold sacred? Who do we serve? How do we show up for one another — not just someday, but *today*? The call to vigilance for us is not so much about scanning the skies for a messiah, but about waking up, waking *fully* up, to the realities of the world here and now. To its ache for justice, to communities longing for compassion, to the present moment pregnant with possibility.

Jesus tells us not to be afraid, not because there's nothing to fear, but because fear doesn't get the final word. The kingdom — his vision of peace and plenty, justice and inclusion — is not something we have to earn or secure or defend. It's already been given. It's already among us. We have just to wake up to it. We have to be ready for it — not for a thief in

the night, but for the quiet knock of grace at our door. We have to be dressed for action — not for survival, but for service. We have to keep our lamps lit — not to expose some enemy, but to illuminate the path for ourselves and our neighbors. Because when the holy shows up — in a stranger's need, in a moment of clarity, in the stillness of our own hearts — may it not find us asleep, but awake, open, and ready to receive. Amen.