

The day and hour unknown

based on Mark 13:24-37

Props: clothing, wash basket, table or chair

A woman enters with a basket that she places on a table or chair. She starts folding items from the basket, then suddenly notices someone she knows has arrived, although she did not hear the person enter. This person is not seen, and the reader can address the congregation as if talking to the person.

Oh, hello! I didn't hear you come in. I'm afraid things are in a bit of disarray here. You see, the master of the house asked us to prepare for a journey. However, he did not tell us when we are to leave or where we are going—only that we are to ready ourselves for the journey. So we are doing the best we can to prepare and are on alert for his arrival, which could be at any moment.

Have you seen him recently? Do you know what his plans are? Pardon my asking, but obviously, we have a lot of questions, and it is difficult to prepare. How do you get ready when you don't know what you are getting ready for?

On the other hand, if the master of the house were here, he would tell me not to worry. He would ask when he has ever led me into a situation where I could not rely on him. Or he *might* ask when he has ever let me down or was unavailable to help me. My answer to any of these questions would be the same: Never. I can always count on him. To be perfectly honest, I cannot remember a situation when I couldn't ask for his help.

I always have questions. I don't understand why my confidence seems to falter when others seem to have a steady and secure foothold. Why can't I be stronger? My faith never leaves me completely, but I find myself hesitating. I become bewildered and anxious, even afraid, seeking assurance when I most want to radiate courage.

I suppose it is just my nature. I've always been inquisitive and asked questions. I like to know what is going on because when I know what is happening, I can put a plan in place. A plan gives me a sense of security and helps me know how to move forward. Isn't this normal? Don't most people make plans?

Some people are perfectly comfortable stepping into the unknown, ready at a moment's notice to face whatever lies ahead. I wish I could be more like them, to trust more and worry less. I suppose it comes down to liking a certain amount of control, and I'm embarrassed to admit, my feelings of worth are too closely tied to my ability to be of service.

The master of the house has a different viewpoint. He tells me my worth is tied to the faith I put in him, not the work I do for him, that there are more important ways to get ready for the road than to clean and pack. Just as one puts a plan in place for a journey, it is also important to prepare to enter *into the experience* of the journey. The master of the house regularly reminds me of the importance of having the right mindset. He tells me that the groundwork I lay inwardly is more important than my outward actions.

I admit that I have missed blessings around me because I was too focused on the responsibilities at my fingertips. Sometimes I form expectations that can leave me feeling disheartened, frustrated, or angry when they don't happen as I imagined or expected. Sometimes I even feel completely out of sync with life around me. I tend to prioritize checking things off my to-do list before focusing myself. I thought I knew what it meant to get ready, but getting ready is harder and more complicated than I had realized.

I have room for improvement—a lot of room for improvement. I will need to be on guard because it does not come naturally to ready myself in this way. I also need to remind myself that uncertainty is not a reflection of outcome. While the anticipation of the road ahead can make me feel uneasy and nervous, this is not something I have to fix. The plan is quite simple. Follow the master of the house, trust in his abilities, and have faith in his plan.

I realize you have caught me making tangible preparations. But I want you to know that when the master of the house arrives and asks if I am ready, I will be able to say I am. I have already asked myself if I am ready in the hidden

areas that only I know. I don't want to miss out on the great mystery of what lies ahead. In the meantime, while my hands may be busy, the rest of me will remain alert and ready. Waiting for what is to come and watching for his arrival. I will be able to look to him and say I am ready.

Will you?

John the Baptist prepares the way

based on Mark 1:1-8

Come (*motioning*), come closer and hear the words of the Lord. You ventured this far into the wilderness. Can't you take a few steps more? What prevents you? Is it your ignorance, your fear, or your sin? Do you think you have no sin? Do you stand there counting your generosity and good deeds against the judgment of sin that the Lord casts before you? If so, you are a fool, just one more fool in a world drowning in sin. You reek of it. It oozes out of you like waste and decay. If you have simply come to gawk, then leave. There is nothing for you here.

The time is at hand when you must prepare yourselves for the coming of the Messiah. Turn away from your sins and ask for forgiveness from the One who made you. You cannot avoid the tax that is coming due. You cannot run or hide from it. The only path that does not end in ruin is the one that leads to God.

If you are honest, you know you need to repent. Look at the flowing waters of the Jordan. When you come with repentance in your heart, I will baptize you in the name of the Lord. And the water—it will be as if it washes you clean. You will arise into new life, with your sins forgiven, prepared to meet the judgment to come. If you choose not to renounce your sins, no other decisions will be needed. You have also chosen the outcome of your trial, and you have chosen the executioner over your salvation. The choice belongs to each of you. Who will come?

Do not be deaf! Open your hearts and minds to hear the truth of these words. And yes, I mean you (*pointing*), and you (*pointing*), and you (*pointing*). Not one person here, including myself, will be free from judgment. Now is the time to exchange your worldly goals for heavenly wisdom and to ask God's forgiveness of your sins. His arms are open, and he is waiting. But he will not wait forever.

Those of you who count yourselves as pillars of your community, leaders of the church, or wealthy beyond recognition, I tell you now that your prominence and prestige, your importance and stature, your money and privilege, hold no value in the court of the Lord. They will not save you from your sins. Indeed, when you value these above all else, they become a plague on your house. You cannot bargain or buy yourself into God's favor. Only one road leads you into God's light, and it has nothing to do with who you are or what you have.

It has to do with the state of your heart. This is true of the most important and the lowliest among you. God makes no distinction. We all like to believe we are the masters of our own destiny, but it is only when you put yourself on the road of repentance, when you humble yourself, admit your sin, and acknowledge your need for forgiveness, that the Lord will recognize you.

You can reject me, scorn me, and call me a liar. If you think I care what your opinion is of me, you are wrong. You can ignore my message, call it a hoax or deception, but the only one you will be deceiving is yourself. Rejecting the message doesn't mean the message is not authentic or absolute. No, rejecting the message only proves you are a colossal fool. Truth is truth, and your opposition, disbelief, or ridicule does not change it. God's law is undeniable, unshakable, and indisputable, whether you choose to acknowledge it or not. Your life is utterly dependent on him.

I tell you again, heed my words as one who calls to you in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord. Put your house in order, make straight the paths before you, and anticipate his coming. Seek that which is from God and not the trappings of man. Acknowledge your sins and ask for forgiveness. Do it now! Today! Time is growing short.

Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, cannot forgive your sins or guarantee your salvation. Neither can Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea, or the mighty Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus, emperor of the world. Only God can do this, and the time is coming when he will make himself known. These men will bow to the true King.

Do not think I am the one who has come to save you. I am not. I am only a servant who has come to give you fair warning. Someone will come after me, one who is powerful, one whose sandals I am not worthy to unfasten. I come before him as a mere messenger, cautioning you that the time is near. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and save your souls.

Turn to God. I beg you, do it today. You will not find forgiveness simply listening to me. You must act. Look around. Look where you are. Your boasts and achievements and wealth mean nothing. The lies you tell yourself about your honesty and integrity sink into the sand at your feet. You need to ready yourselves, and the road to readiness involves repentance. You cannot become transformed without confession. To ignore the message is ruin.

Who will come? Will you?

John the Baptist denies being the Messiah

based on John 1:19-28

I love spending time in the temple because I feel closer to God. I can listen to a reading from the Torah or discuss a religious passage. I can observe the transaction of temple business, watch sacrificial rituals, or study the diverse assortment of people who flow in and out of the temple every day. Those crowds have been steadily growing. More and more people are stopping in Jerusalem, having come from or on their way to Bethany beyond the Jordan, and all because of one man.

To say he is unique would be an understatement. His name is John, but they refer to him as John the Baptizer or John the Baptist because he calls people to confess their sins and baptizes the repentant. Reports are that he is a blunt man, and that both his demeanor and appearance follow suit. They say instead of a traditional linen tunic, he wears clothing made of camel's hair, and he eats locusts and wild honey. I know some have returned saying that rather than graciously receiving those who had journeyed to hear his message, he verbally attacked them. Yet he claims to be a man of God, and no one who sees him seems to doubt this is true.

It was no surprise that both the Sadducees and Pharisees took notice and began asking questions. They discovered that although he was born into a priestly family, he was not given his father's name and he did not take up his father's work, which is highly unusual. John's father, Zechariah, is a priest. In the eyes of the authorities, that also makes his son John a priest. John grew up in the remote wilderness areas of Judea, so the desert is familiar to him. But they certainly didn't understand why a priest was acting in such an unconventional way.

John's claims (that he is baptizing in preparation of the Lord's coming) made people start to wonder if he was the longed-for Messiah, or Elijah, or even the prophet. Once these questions started circulating, the Jewish leaders had to take action. So they decided to send a delegation of priests and Levites to talk to John and get some answers. My uncle was a part of this group, and when he asked me to come along as a witness, I jumped at the opportunity. I was anxious to get a close look at the man.

Upon our arrival, they wasted no time. The questioning began immediately.

"Who are you? Are you the Messiah?" I knew they were asking this because every Jew believes that sooner or later, God will intervene to save them. But we don't have a common understanding how this will happen.

John did not seem to be caught off guard or alarmed by this question. He simply rejected the idea. In fact, he passionately declared loud enough for everyone to hear, "I am not the Messiah."

They asked, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" This question did not surprise me either. It is believed that Elijah will return to signal the Messiah's coming and prepare the world to receive him. Having secretly wondered about this theory myself, I held my breath in anticipation of his answer.

Without hesitation John's voice rang out clear and strong, "I am not."

"Are you the prophet?" they asked. Every Jew recognizes the reference in this question—a scriptural promise that the Lord will raise up a prophet from our midst. John's response was short and to the point.

"No."

A heavy silence followed, and I found myself thoroughly fascinated by this strange man. He stood alone before a delegation of Jewish leaders who wore their authority like suits of armor, and he did not give the slightest indication that he was concerned by their questions. He also did not attempt to explain himself. He obviously had no interest in appeasing anyone. He did not waver or tremble as I had seen men do in the temple courts. In fact, he looked completely composed. I found it quite extraordinary.

Someone finally broke the stillness. "Who are you? You must give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied, "I am nothing more than a voice bidding people to prepare the way for the Lord."

Someone else asked, "If you are not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet, why are you baptizing?"

“I am only baptizing with water,” John said, “but there is one among you, one you do not recognize, who will come after me, and I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals.”

I was stunned! At the very least, John was a powerful preacher. People were coming from far and wide to hear him. From what I could tell, he was a man brimming with conviction and purpose, but he identified himself as nothing more than a servant. I don't think I had ever seen anyone with that kind of power within their grasp not reach for it with both hands.

Who is this man called John the Baptizer? He willingly threw on a cloak of humility that would have been too heavy for most men to carry, and he wore it as if it weighed nothing. Over and over, he refocused attention away from himself and toward God. I found his message to be both a warning and a call to action. I quickly recognized my own need to pay attention to the places I had wandered off the path, the need to reset my course. On the road back to Jerusalem, I found myself recalibrating my thoughts. I discovered lost pieces of myself I didn't even know were missing.

I also found it odd that though I never stepped into the water, by the time I arrived back in Jerusalem I couldn't deny some type of change had taken place. I had returned renewed and restored. When people ask me about my time in the wilderness, I tell them John the Baptizer was clear about who he was and who he was not. I ask them if they can say the same.

Who are you? Do you know?

The birth of Jesus revealed

based on Luke 1:26-38

When I was young, my mother used to tell me a story about a rabbi who had a dream. In the dream, he got the chance to see where the selfish and the givers end up. First, he saw where the selfish people were taken. He couldn't believe his eyes! It was a big, beautiful banquet hall where the tables were lavishly decorated, and the food was piled high. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that no one was eating. He wondered why until he realized that a three-foot-long spoon was strapped to each of their arms. Without the ability to bend their elbows, they could not eat. So each one sat hungry at a table filled with food.

The rabbi was then led out of this room to the place where givers go. He couldn't understand what he was seeing! It was also a beautiful banquet hall where the tables were lavishly decorated, and the food was piled high. Just as in the other hall, a three-foot spoon was strapped to each person's arm, but there was a difference. Here the people sitting at the tables looked happy. He saw that in this room, each arm stretched out to reach the mouth of another. Here no one went hungry, because everyone could eat.

My mother told me givers get used to giving, but selfish people only understand taking, no matter where they live or how much they have. She said learning this lesson would serve me well in my service to God.

I grew up in Nazareth, where the houses are built on the steep sides of a hill. The location allows them to receive morning sunlight. The soil is good, and the rainfall is generous, so we are never without food. The weather is usually kind because of the hill's protection. However, with only one spring of water for the entire village, the town does not grow much. This suited me fine. Growing up I felt safe and secure.

My husband, Joseph, also grew up in Nazareth. He does not talk much, but his mind is always working. He is conscientious, faithful, and gentle. Joseph works as a carpenter. He is a thinker, and I am a planner, so we are a good match. And in case you're wondering, Joseph is a giver. I know this because in the sixth month of our betrothal something happened that changed our lives. Joseph was by my side every step of the way.

It was spring, a time when most of the rains had passed and the ground was green. It had been a busy day, and I was hunting for some privacy in the cooler evening air. I thought I heard the rumble of thunder, but the sky was clear. I was preoccupied, looking for storm clouds, when a voice broke the silence.

"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

I turned around to see who called to me. No one was there, but I noticed that the light around me seemed to be shining brighter. The sun had already set, so it should have been darker.

I was confused. I closed my eyes and stumbled back a step. The voice came again.

"Don't be afraid, Mary."

I opened my eyes. No one was there, but the light seemed even brighter. I took a small step forward, looking into the light in front of me. Slowly, the light shifted, and a figure began to form, growing in size as if walking toward me from a long distance. When the figure reached me, I felt dwarfed by its presence. When I finally gained enough courage to look up, I found an attentive face looking at me. In the same voice I had heard before, the figure said, "Mary."

Then, unbelievably, an even stranger thing happened. From some place deep inside, I understood that this illuminated figure was an angel.

The angel said, "Do not be afraid," and I suddenly realized I no longer was. The angel told me I had found favor with God. I had been chosen to conceive and bear a son.

The angel said, "You shall call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever! His kingdom will never end."

I could feel my face growing warm and the blood pounding in my ears, but I did my best not to let the chaotic feelings rolling inside me sway me from my spot.

“I don’t think this is possible. I am a virgin. I am engaged but am not yet married.”

The angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The child to be born will be called holy, for he will be the Son of God. Go and visit your kinswoman Elizabeth. She is old and has been called barren, yet she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. See for yourself that nothing is impossible with God.”

I bowed my head, searching for how to respond, and that’s when it happened . . . the revelation. In that moment, I discovered I am also a giver. I whispered, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

Then the angel was gone, only a cloud blowing over the plains.

I have been on a road of revelation ever since. I have discovered things about myself I never knew. I remain watchful for what is yet to be revealed.

What about you?

Jesus presented in the temple

based on Luke 2:22-40

This monologue is best presented by an older woman. She can use the congregation as a reference point for the person she is talking to.

Hello. Can I help you with something? I am well acquainted with the temple. How can I be of service? *(slight pause)* Oh, you heard about the young child who was here the other day. His parents brought him for the purification ritual since he is their firstborn. *(slight pause)* Yes, he created quite a stir, but I'm afraid they are no longer here. They made their offering and left.

My name is Anna. I was here that day. I am here every day. *(nodding)* Yes, every day. I have a small room here in the temple, and it serves my needs well. *(slight pause)* My story? Are you sure you really want . . . ? *(Pause as if being interrupted.)* Very well, but I'm afraid there is not much to tell.

I came here so long ago it can be easy to forget I once had a life outside these walls. But I haven't forgotten everything. My father was from the tribe of Asher. Asher means "happy one," and we were indeed happy. I was married once. For seven years we had a joy-filled life, but then my husband was taken home to be with the Lord. As a young widow, I was encouraged to remarry, but I knew that was not to be my destiny. So I came here and turned to another whom I loved with all my heart. I turned to God. My life is different from most, but I am content. I am happy here, and I have purpose. What more can an old woman ask?

My life at the temple is comfortable. I spend most of my time in prayer and fasting. For my age, the Lord has blessed me with stamina and strong knees. It might take me a little longer to get up, but I can still kneel in prayer to my Lord.

But you do not want to hear me prattle on. You want to hear about the child. Yes? As I said before, his parents brought him to the temple for the purification ritual of the firstborn. His mother had two pigeons to offer in sacrifice.

A man I know named Simeon was also in the temple that day. Simeon is a good man, a godly man. He lives a humble life in prayer and worship. He told me once of a message he received from the Holy Spirit—that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. He spends his days quietly and patiently watching for God to reveal himself.

When Simeon saw those parents and the child they call Jesus, his face radiated with joy. He quickly went and took the child in his arms. The words he spoke captured the attention of everyone around him. Simeon praised God, saying, "Lord, as you promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your instrument of salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light to bring your revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel."

The look of amazement on the parents' faces mirrored those around them. They were even more astonished when Simeon turned his attention to them and said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, to be a sign that will be spoken against and will meet with much opposition. As for you, a sword will pierce your soul. All of this will happen so that the inner thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."

As Simeon spoke, my eyes were opened. Suddenly, I saw the great significance of this child and the size of the net he would cast. My heart seemed to expand, filling with happiness. In jubilation, I approached this young family, and laying my hands on the child, I gave thanks to God.

From that day on, I have spoken to everyone who comes seeking and to everyone who looks forward to the redemption of Jerusalem through this miraculous child. I also pray for the child daily. I pray that he will grow in strength and wisdom, and for God's grace to shine upon him for all to see.

Life in the temple is never boring, and I have seen many things, but never have I seen anything as glorious as that child or heard anything as wondrous as Simeon's words. I have been on this earth for a long time, and the road I have

traveled is a long one. I have experienced sorrow and pain, but there has also been joy. I have discovered it over and over, and each time I find it, I rejoice for the blessing I have received.

I know you came looking for the child and are disappointed he is not here. Please indulge an old woman and listen to this small grain of wisdom she has learned in her long life. To find Jesus, look for the spirit of God within your heart, and when you feel his light pierce your soul, rejoice, for your salvation is at hand.

Can you do that? Will you?

The magi seek the Messiah

based on Matthew 2:1-12

In my country, I am part of a group called the magi. Sometimes we are called wise men or even holy men. At one time we were a tribe of priests, but over time this changed. Instead of devoting ourselves to the study of holy texts, we became skilled in philosophy, medicine, and the natural sciences. I, myself, study the heavens.

People are always looking for answers, and they look to us for many things. Some consider us soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. They believe we can foretell the future from the stars, and that a man's destiny is determined by the star under which he is born. I can't say there isn't some truth to this, for the stars follow a natural rhythm of seasons and time. They represent order in a chaotic world, so I understand why people look to the heavens to find their answers. Many times, I have followed signs in the sky when traveling. One journey has stayed with me longer than any of the others—a journey to find a king.

In the Egyptian month of Messori, an unusual star rose, shining with extraordinary brilliance. We understood this to signify the arrival of a king into the world, and we were not alone. In fact, the world seemed to be waiting in eager anticipation. Many cultures had a long-established belief that at this time, the East was to grow powerful, and a ruler would rise out of Judea. The location of the star reinforced this direction, so some of my fellow magi and I set out to follow the star and find this king.

The journey was not quick or short, but we had prepared for the trip and we had the means to buy supplies along the way. Eventually, we found ourselves in the town of Jerusalem, at the palace of the current ruler, Herod Antipas. Our arrival caused quite a stir, and upon hearing the reason for our visit, Herod sought counsel from the Jewish chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem. Herod wanted to know exactly where the "anointed one of God" was to be born. The Jewish leaders confirmed our understanding—it was foretold he would be born in Bethlehem, in Judea. They quoted their religious texts, "You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the leaders of Judah; for from you will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

After gaining this information, Herod met with us privately. He asked us for the exact time the star had appeared. We volunteered the information, but I felt a small sense of apprehension. In my studies, I spend a lot of time analyzing darkness and light. Usually I am observing them from the realm above, but there is also darkness and light on the earthly plane that is no less fascinating. It emanates from people's hearts and the nature of their character.

People who live their lives in darkness or in light are easy to recognize. They can't help but show their true nature. But those who wander between light and darkness live in the shadows, half in darkness and half in light. They are more difficult to see and even harder to understand. To me, Herod Antipas seemed to be such a man. He acted eager to send us on our way, even implored us to diligently search until we had found the child. But then he said something I found strange. After we had found the child, he told us to report back to him so he himself could go and worship this king. Not only did his desire strike a note of insincerity, but the light in his eyes was full of shadows. What king worships his replacement?

I was more than happy to return to the road and overjoyed to see the star was still before us. We followed it to a humble cottage in the town of Bethlehem. Inside we found a young child and his mother. Upon entering the home, we knew without a doubt this was the child we sought. With great reverence we bowed and without an ounce of hesitation, we worshiped him.

Once we had shown our respect, we unpacked the gifts we had brought the tiny king. Our gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the most valuable gifts our country had to offer. We were touched by the family's awe and delight in receiving them.

Here I saw nothing of what we had left at Herod's palace. No shadows, only warm, glorious light, much like the star we followed. I was filled with wonder.

When we finally left and retired for the evening, I expected to fall into a sound sleep. Instead I had a restless night and woke with the remnants of a dream still with me. I soon discovered that my companions shared a similar dream. In the dream, we were warned not to return to Herod's palace or report on the whereabouts of the child. We were in total agreement that the dream was a warning we would heed. We would make our way home by a different route, giving Herod's palace a wide berth.

The road home gave me time to reflect on everything I had seen. The darkness I had felt in Herod's presence was unnerving and chilling. The light I felt in the presence of the child destined to be a king was luminous and incandescent.

Do you remember before when I told you people are always looking for answers? Over the years, I have learned many things. In my travels, I have seen many more. I always seem to be on one road or another, but no matter what road I'm on, I always follow the light.

What about you?