Every week we confess that we believe that Christ will come again in judgement. This week’s readings, like last week’s, shed some light on what that means. The reading from Zephaniah says that, “At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.’” If I was making a list of groups who should be worried when Christ returns, these folks would not be on it, but is there a greater sin than disregarding God? The psalmist tells us, “all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.” Psalm 90 is an excellent reminder that our lives are less than a blink of God’s eye. Paul tells the Thessalonians, “you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” When we put all of the readings leading up to the Gospel together, we have a theme of readiness: those who are not ready will be punished, our time on Earth is short, so we must use it well, and we have no way of knowing when the Lord will return. The readings end with a word of comfort and some advice from Paul: “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

Has the threat, “Just wait until your father gets home” ever been used in your household? Was it effective? It has a lot to do with the attitude of the child toward the parents, doesn’t it? The parable of the talents works in much the same way. We aren’t sure what motivates the slaves who wisely invest the master’s money, but they are rewarded by living the high life while the master is away and by being given more work and more responsibility when the master returns. Like Joseph after he decodes the Pharaoh's dreams and predicts seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, they seem to go from slaves to people of importance in the community. The third slave is afraid of the master, so he makes sure that he can return what he has been given. One can imagine that he was miserable long before the master returns. Perhaps we are to assume that the first two slaves are motivated by devotion and the third by fear of the master. One thing that stands out is that there is another option that is not given; why isn’t there a slave who is given a talent, risks it, and loses it? Like those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm,’ it is those who are not motivated to use their talents who are sinning.

The overall lesson, that we are called to use our God-given talents if we wish to live a life that pleases God, is fairly straightforward, but there is still the question of motivation. Jesus is talking to the disciples. Is he telling them to wait until their father gets home because they will be facing possible punishment, or is he telling them to wait until their father gets home because they will be able to receive even greater abundance? If we worship a God whom we believe is vindictive, can we possibly experience the freedom necessary for our talents to flourish? I believe that the threat of punishment is an extremely poor motivator and that we work much harder when we are trying to please others than when we fear them. It is not the fear of Hell that should drive us, but the unwillingness to risk missing out on the promise of eternal life with God. AMEN