No matter how many times we hear these parables, they always have the power to disturb us. No matter what we may learn about them—their context, the cultural assumptions of the original audience, the ways parables are intended to be ironic or subversive—these parables of Jesus in Matthew can make us cringe. Did this make you squirm a little bit in your seat just now?

As one who has studied these parables and whom you have chosen to help you make sense of them, I could attempt to save this parable for you. I could tell you how I think it is totally faithful to read this parable with the understanding that the greedy, harsh master is actually the master of this world, seeking nothing but money and power; that the two favored servants play the master’s game and do as he expects, and though they are rewarded, they finally serve only to enrich their master, not themselves; and that the third slave—the one who refuses to enable his master’s worship of wealth and instead does the honorable thing by giving the money back—that this slave is Jesus, crucified outside the city while the sun refused to shine and where there was, presumably, at least some weeping and gnashing of teeth by his friends and disciples; and that as readers of the gospel we know that he is vindicated on the third day and shown to be righteous, whatever the greedy master may say.

I could give you this interpretation and make this story more palatable; but I won’t. I won’t because, although I think that is one good and faithful way to interpret this parable, I do not think that is why Matthew is telling us this story in this way at this time. It is always our temptation to tame these wily parables; to domesticate them and make them serve us by helping us feel more comfortable. The simple truth, however, is that these stories—and the God of whom they speak to us—are not safe. In C. S. Lewis’ classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, before Lucy Pevensie meets Aslan the Lion for the first time, she asks her guide, Mr. Beaver, if Aslan is safe. Mr. Beaver replies, “Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good.”

These stories are not intended to make us feel safe. They are intended to unsettle us. They are intended to impress upon us the gravity of our situation. The prophet Zephaniah criticizes the people who say, “The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm,” the people who believe that God either doesn’t care what we do while we way for the day of the LORD, or that God is unwilling or unable to save us from the very real dangers we face in life. These stories are intended to disturb us, to make us sit up and pay attention, to “make our ears tingle,” as the prophets say. They are intended to remind us that the God we serve is not safe, but also that God is good.

As we read Jesus’ parable, we might be dismayed that God appears to be like this greedy and harsh master, but I wonder if Jesus’ point is that even a greedy and harsh master can give good things to those who are faithful to him. If such a sinner can do that, how much more abundant will God’s blessings be to those who are faithful? The stories told by Jesus and Zephaniah and Paul are all intended to remind us that the day of the LORD is coming, and that what we do while we wait is important.

Thanksgiving is in two weeks. It makes me remember Thanksgiving six years ago when our house was broken into while we were way. A thief literally came in the night; had we known to expect him, we would have been ready. After the fact, I spent weeks lying awake thinking about how I could be ready for the next time—all the gadgets and sensors and alarms I could wire up and hook to my phone and whatever else to prevent another break-in. But I also spent those weeks thinking about what I would have done to the thief had I caught them in the act. My thoughts were not filled with pleasant things. During those weeks after the burglary, I was forced to reckon with the darkness of my own soul.

It is that darkness that clouds our sight of the day of the LORD; it blocks our vision of God’s reign and allows us to see only what is right in front of us: the fear, the anger, and the pain the world can cause us; the reality of what life can take away from us. It tempts us to place our trust in our own ability to fight evil with force and violence, to rely solely upon human measures and means of keeping order. These things are not necessarily bad, but if we place our ultimate trust in the things that promise us “peace and security” in this world, we will be sorely disappointed when those things are swept away to make room for the new thing that God is about to do.

That darkness exists within all of us, but Paul reminds us that we do not belong to that darkness; it does not own us, we are not slaves to it. We belong to the daylight—the daylight of God’s reign. We have seen the seal of God’s promise of redemption and salvation for all creation in the resurrection of Jesus Christ who died for us. The light of God pierces our darkness so that we can see what lies ahead, so that we can perceive what is coming. The way of God seems like foolishness to us; it seems to be unable to protect us from danger and distress, but the promise of God is that the day is soon coming when the whole world will be under God’s reign, when justice and mercy and peace will be the law of the land.

When that day comes, those of us living in darkness will be dismayed as everything in which we have placed our trust is swept away. No more war, no more capitalism or communism or socialism—no more “isms” at all to keep us safe and comfortable. No more threat of violence to protect us from those who would do us harm. No more will we be able to depend on our own strength or skill or ability to gain wealth and success for ourselves. It will be a day of great gloom and distress.

But for those of us who belong to the day, who have seen this day coming and prepared ourselves for it, who have lived according to that faith while we have waited, this sweeping away will not be cause for distress, but for joy—joy because we know that the destruction of everything we know and love is not the end of the story, but rather the beginning of a better one.

To live that faith now, to live as day-people in the middle of the night, is foolishness. It can’t protect us from thieves or burglars, it can’t save us from madmen with guns or hostile nations with armies, it can’t offer us the peace and security we crave. And yet, Paul reminds us elsewhere that God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, that true life is more than peace and security. The life that God has in store has none of the things that we have come to depend upon for peace and security, and yet we trust in God’s promise that this life will be so much better than the one we now endure: it will be a life in which all tears are wiped away, a life in which death and crying and pain are no more; a life in which justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The oracles of Zephaniah and the parables of Jesus remind us that this God we serve is not safe, and that when this God comes to bring God’s reign on earth, nothing in all creation will be safe from God’s creative and redeeming work. For those of us who place our trust in human power structures and in the work of our own hands, for those of us who choose to bury our riches in a hole in the hopes that it will be safe, this is very bad news.

But for those of us who belong to the day, who can see what the LORD is doing and the promise of life that God is bringing, we can rejoice in knowing that whatever death and destruction may come to us now is only a prelude to the new life which awaits us under God’s reign. We risk everything when we invest all that we have been given in that reality which is not yet evident; but instead of being disappointed, we have the promise of a full return on that investment—a full return with interest. That is the promise with which we support and encourage one another while we wait for the day of the LORD.

So, yes; this parable may disturb us, but maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe we need to be disturbed, to be shaken out of our slumber, our complacency. Maybe we need to be jerked awake so that we can look out into the night and see the faintest glimpse of the Day of the Lord beginning to dawn over the horizon.