

August 11, 2018 - Pentecost 9C

“Guided by Luke: Dressing for Action” - © Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture: Luke 12:22-40

I want to begin today by saying “Thank you” to all of you. I thank you because you are willing to stick through these difficult verses from the Gospel of Luke. My personal hope is that, in our confrontation of their difficulty, we are also able to deal more directly with difficulties in our daily lives.

It bears remembering that the reason these difficulties and challenges are arising in the Gospel of Luke is because Jesus set his eyes upon Jerusalem and we are wading ever deeper every week into the mud, the swamp, the darkness of human experience - all of which leads directly to the Cross. At each moment along the way, Jesus deals with new challenges, and therefore so do we.

Like last week, we start out well enough with a simple teaching -

*“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

Luke’s Gospel is all about seeing from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, and the easy, pithy, saying is never just what it appears to be. For instance, in this saying about our treasure, notice that the verb tenses are different. What I do with my treasure now directs where my heart will go. As an example, when Kate and I bought a Jeep Renegade a few months ago, I suddenly was aware how many Jeep Renegades there were on the road. My money went to a particular car, and now I am able to see that particular car. If my treasure is with the homeless, I will see the homeless. If my treasure is with the asylum seeker, I will see more people seeking asylum. On and on. And it isn’t just about money, though money is how we track where our energy is going for many, many things in our culture today. One’s treasure is also about one’s cares, one’s actions, one’s motivations and interests. Ultimately, what Jesus is saying in that little saying is an exercise in deepening our awareness of the hidden presence of the Kingdom of God just under the veil of everyday life.

Paying attention to one’s treasure and what we see as a result, leads to some strange outcomes. The deeper we get into our faith journey, the more things come into our

awareness. And the more we are aware of, the more we realize we need to be ready for what is coming to the world, good things and bad things.

And so Jesus also tells us,

*“Dress for action and keep your lamps lit”.*

Be ready, because you do not know the time or the hour of the coming of the Lord into your worldly experience. **Being ready** is a strong command that Jesus repeats in all four Gospels. **Being ready** is also a powerful Biblical theme, even if the words aren't spoken directly.

In 1 Kings 17, Elijah is sent by the Lord to the village of Zarephath, where he is told he will find a widow who is supposed to give him food. Elijah goes and finds the widow. It turns out she is very reticent to share her food with Elijah because she has very little left and, as she says,

*I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die (17:12).*

Elijah thought he was going to meet a widow who would feed him, but he is confronted with a far more complex situation. God called Elijah to be ready, but for what Elijah wasn't quite sure. Notice, however, that Elijah's answer to the widow about her situation begins the same as Jesus' to the disciples today,

*“Don't be afraid”.*

Jesus adds, *“My small little flock”* to the phrase.

In Exodus 33, Moses asks to see God's glory, since Moses' seeing would act as assurance and proof for the continuing journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. God tells Moses that he will put him in the cleft of a rock and that God's back, but not his face, will be seen. Here is the funny thing about this story. Unlike virtually every other story in the Old Testament, where we have the structure of a request made to God, a telling of how the request will be fulfilled by God, and then a narrative about the fulfillment of the request, this story only has the first two parts. The narrative of this event never takes place. Imagine, that Moses spends his days *being ready* for this moment to take place.

Keep your lamps lit, and dress for action, Jesus tells the disciples today. Be ready, because the way of the Lord is to show up at any moment, to provide for the Lord's people at any moment.

We can be ready in an anxiety, fear-based, way, always expecting the worst to happen and, in our fear, miss the presence of the Lord. This is the way of the widow of Zarephath. She is at once fearful and resigned to her and her son's death. Her readiness is also a way of dressing herself for death.

When I was in chaplain training at Abbott Northwestern Hospital, I was the on-call chaplain at least once a month. Being on call meant taking home a beeper and being ready to head over to the hospital at any time. It was a little like keeping a lamp lit because I had to make sure the battery wasn't dying on the beeper. More to the point, I would dress for action by not getting undressed for bed on the nights I was on-call. But even more, my readiness was filled with anxiety and fear. My chaplaincy training was traumatic and difficult. When I was on-call, I felt like the beeper was an attachment to my body which made the entire hospital an extension of my body. It is hard to describe, but I lived in a state of continual anxiety. I had a lamp lit - my beeper - and I was dressed for action, but I am certain I missed a lot because of the anxiety and fear that surrounded the experience.

We can also get ready for the Lord in an anticipatory way which acknowledges the excitement of what is to come. I suspect this is the state of mind of Moses, waiting to be sent to the cleft in the rock so he can see God's glory. Moses dresses for the day every day in anticipation of the glory of God. Moses keeps the lamps well trimmed and filled with oil so he can one day see the glory of God. Is today the day?

There is a sense of urgency in Jesus' words to the disciples. Things are about to happen in a very short period of time. Jesus will tell the disciples several times in the Gospel of Luke to be ready, to keep the lamps lit and dress for action. He tells them,

*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."*

Did you catch what the slaves need to be ready for? Did you hear what the disciples need to prepare for in those two verses? I am often troubled by the slave language in Scripture. I think it is disingenuous to try to normalize slavery in any day and age, or to suggest slaves were somehow treated differently in the ancient world than in our understanding of slavery. This is simply not true. Slavery was as brutal 2000 years ago as it has been in our history. It is the nature of owning people to dehumanize them, whether now or in the ancient past. Remember what slavery does - it transfers the trauma of work to the body and soul onto the body and soul of another human being. A slave suffers the trauma of work so you don't have to. The wrongness of it is eternally true. I think, based on stories like today, that Jesus may have felt similarly towards slavery.

The reason I say this is, listen again to verse 37:

What will the slaves who have kept their lamps lit and who have dressed for action experience?

*When the master comes, **the master** will fasten his belt and have **the slaves** sit down to eat and **the master** will come and serve them.*

In a single sentence, Jesus overthrows the entire social and economic structure of the Roman Empire. *This* is what we are preparing for, the complete reversal of social orders, the inversion of power, a leveling of the field and the erasure of inequality. This is what Jesus does. It is what God does.

The widow of Zarepheth is focused on her and her son's death. Elijah comes to her home and tells her, *Do not be afraid. Be ready for the coming of the Lord.* And how does the Lord come to the widow's home? By keeping her stocks of flour and oil filled to the brim for the rest of her days. This is a complete reversal of not only the widow's situation, but also the situation the village of Zarepheth had imposed upon the widow. Why else would the continual admonishment of the prophets be *take care of the widows, the orphans, and the poor*? If the widows, orphans, and poor were being taken care of, we wouldn't need prophets to tell us to do it. It is one of the ways we keep our lamps lit and dress for action. Elijah, with God's help, turns the status quo inside out and transmutes the widow's focus on death into the continual reminder of the presence and provision of life.

Right after Moses is told by God that this cleft-of-the-rock event will happen, Moses goes to the top of the mountain and God dictates the 10 Commandments again for Moses to give to the people. The social revolution here is this divine union between God and the people by way of a covenant. God makes a promise with the people God has chosen so the people can not only live together but also so that God can live with God's people. The anticipation of Moses drives him and God's people forward into new lands and new ways of being.

So why do we keep our lamps lit and dress for action as followers of Jesus Christ? By following Jesus' ways of love, non-violence, community and hope modeled by the prophets and Moses, we stand always ready for the coming of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom where the human social order is turned inside out and overthrown. This can create a way of being ready filled with fear and anxiety, especially if we are invested in the social order as it stands; or we can be ready with a sense of anticipation, especially if we are invested in the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The Psalmist puts it this way in Psalm 119:

*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*

*I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments.*

*I am afflicted very much: quicken me, O Lord, according unto thy word.*

*Accept, I beseech thee, the freewill offerings of my mouth, O Lord, and teach me thy judgments.*

Light my path, O Lord, even if I am conflicted. In my affliction, let me anticipate your arrival. Way back in Luke 4, Jesus told us what to expect with his ministry and the coming of the Kingdom of God. There in the temple, he unrolled the reading of the day, and read from Isaiah these words:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

*because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Will our lamps be lit, will we be dressed for action, when the Master comes to serve?

Will we see the power and presence of the Lord in serving the poor, in such a way that they are empowered for a new world, a world where impoverishment is seen for the crime it actually is?

Will our lamps be lit so we can see what the Kingdom of God means for people held captive on borders around the world because they are trying to free themselves from oppressive countries and warfare, seeking to walk without fear in a free country?

Will we be dressed for action when those who could not see what was happening around them suddenly see the animals who suffer when their environment is destroyed by melting ice caps or the deforestation of the Amazon? How will the Kingdom of God serve them; how will we, we Americans who are masters of environments and economies alike?

How will we dress for action so we can let go of the nostalgia of 'pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps' as a useful way of living and free the young people from the imposition of debt caused by outrageous college costs and an economy that does not fuel economic freedom for the young?

What, indeed, will the Kingdom of God look like when we keep our lamps lit and we dress for the outrageous action of a God of freedom, hope, faith, and love? Let's find out without fear and anxiety, and with anticipation and the excitement of possibility.

Amen.

