

Ready or Not
Luke 12:32-40
Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

“You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Jesus and his disciples are on a road trip. Unlike the cross country adventures some of you have taken this summer whose itinerary has returned you home safe and sound, Jesus has already let the disciples know that his destination is the cross: he is on the way to his own death. Chapter by chapter, verse by verse, the tension builds; the words of Jesus get darker and darker; the hostility of his opponents becomes more and more palpable. By the time we get to the twelfth chapter in Luke’s Gospel, the crowd that has gathered is so large (in the thousands, Luke says) that they are trampling one another.

In the midst of this chaos and cacophony, Jesus leans in to speak to his disciples, readying them for their lives after his death and resurrection. Intentionally within earshot of the religious authorities lying in wait for him, Jesus tells the disciples not to fear those who can only kill the body, but to fear God alone. At the risk of their own lives, he tells them to be his witnesses. He exhorts them not to worry about the little things—food or clothing or length of days. Instead, he says, “strive for God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Then Jesus tells them tenderly, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Properly translated, Jesus says that the kingdom they have just been told to strive for has already been given to them by God. Sentences like this prompted a biblical scholar named C. H. Dodd to write about “realized eschatology.” He held that, in Jesus, the future God promises us is already present, active, potent; that in Jesus the reign of God has already begun. The parables, in particular for Dodd, were the bearers of the news that God’s kingdom is at stake in the everyday details of human existence, details like the ravens and the lilies that would remind the disciples of God’s eternal reign always unexpectedly breaking into Rome’s endless reign of violence and injustice, of death and hatred.

Then Jesus says, in the same breath, sell your possessions; give the proceeds away; hold on only to what death can never steal or destroy. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. In other words, because God reigns, we may travel light, be generous, and give our hearts to what really matters: not stuff, not self-importance, but mercy and love and forgiveness and gentleness and forbearance and self-control. These are the things no thief can steal or moth destroy.

Finally in these verses, Jesus tells the disciples to be dressed for action and have their lamps lit; to expect his return at the most unexpected hour, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. While Jesus may be talking about his return at the end of time, I think with Dodd that he is also talking about God coming toward us here and now, knocking on the door of our lives, wanting at our hearts. Readiness would be our living in response to God’s reign breaking into the everyday encounters of our lives. With that in mind, I read the newspaper yesterday seeking, amid the stories of violence and injustice, of hatred and death, the story of a life ready to receive and bear witness to God’s kingdom breaking in. I offer two for your consideration.

The first story begins with Amir Ali Guerami. Amir was born in Iran and came to the United States when he was in middle school. He was Muslim; he was overweight; he was bullied. His anglicized middle name was Patrick, so as Amir walked down the hallways of the Silver Spring Middle School in Maryland, his classmates would call after him, “Fat Rick.” Humayun Khan, also a Muslim middle-schooler in Silver Spring, had been born in Pakistan. Humayun became Amir’s sentry, walking alongside him, staring the bullies down, and intervening when they tried to rough him up. But more: he became Amir’s motivator, helping him to exercise and diet. He lost sixty pounds by his sophomore year. Amir, who now owns his own mortgage company in California, was watching the convention when a video came on about Captain Khan. Amir said, “He owed me nothing, a complete stranger, and yet he stood up for me.” Likewise Sergeant Crystal Selby, who dropped Captain Khan off at the gate where he would die of a suicide bomb, said “He taught you how to be better. Not better tanker or better fueller. Better human being.... To me he was a human’s human.” I think that is what it is to be dressed for action, your lamps lit, ready to open the door to God’s reign that is, even now, defeating the reign of death and hatred.

The second story was the story of Yusra Mardini. Yusra is one of ten members of the first ever Refugee Olympic team, ten athletes without a country who have been given a country for a few days at the Olympic Village. That, in itself, feels like God’s kingdom breaking in. Yusra trained in Damascus to be a swimmer, often doing laps in a pool where the roof had been blown off the gym by bombs. At some point, she and her sister Sarah left Syria and fled for their lives, traveling through Lebanon and Turkey, then on to Greece in a six-passenger boat with twenty refugees onboard. Thirty minutes into the voyage, the motor died, setting the boat adrift in rough, cold waters. Yusra, Sarah and two others knew how to swim. “I had one hand with the rope attached to the boat as I moved my two legs and one arm,” Yusra said. “It was three and a half hours in cold water. Your body is almost like...done. I don’t know if I can describe that....It’s tough.

It was really hard for everyone, and I don't blame anyone if they cried. But sometimes you just have to move on." Yusra marched in the opening ceremonies on Friday night. There are nine other stories I could tell you, but suffice it to say, in extremis, this is what it looks like to be dressed for action, lamps lit, ready to open the door to the God whose love is always on the way to defeating death.

Likely our lives will not be lived as dramatically as these lives or as the lives of those who, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, were seeking a homeland whose builder and architect was God. Next week we will read that they "were stoned to death...sawn in two...killed by the sword...went around in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy." Still, in spite of our settled lives, because we once signed on to this road trip with Jesus, we are strangers and sojourners who seek a better country.

How, then, are we to live, ready for God's coming toward us, citizens of God's kingdom? In the first and strangest place, we are to live as though death is already behind us. That is the meaning of our baptism: we live "through Christ the life death can never destroy...free from everything that will threaten to separate us from the love of God in Christ." Day by day, our baptism means that the rulers of the present order can no longer make us anxious or fearful or timid or defensive in exchange for securing our future or our possessions or our position or our lives. When death is behind you, you do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. Those who bear witness in this way often live in death's shadow more consciously than we. I read of the two dozen runners who gathered "on the rutted dirt road outside the barred gate [in South Sudan]. Fighting continued in Juba, about 700 miles to the north; no one spoke of it. Instead, the human mix of nations, tribes, sexes...stretched and milled until someone gestured. Then they formed a tight knot, flung arms across each other's shoulders, and pulled. All heads bowed. 'Almighty Jehovah father, we thank you for the new day that you've given us,' said a raspy voice from within. 'We always pray for you to come upon us and give us protection and also heal us from all injury. In Jesus' name we pray and we believe. Amen.'" We are to be found living as though death were behind us.

In the second place, if we are to be ready for God's coming toward us, we are to be found living for the other. When Jesus tells the disciples to stop worrying about their life, what they will eat or wear, about how long they will live, he is setting them free from a sin perfected in the First World: *incurvatus in se*, the sin of the soul curving in on itself, not only bending the best gifts of God toward itself," to borrow Martin Luther's words, "but using God to attain these gifts, seeking all things, even God, for its own sake." Again a refugee is our tutor in this readiness. Anelina Nadai Lohalith, a runner from South Sudan told a reporter: "We are representing the millions of refugees all over the world. Maybe in years to come, I will represent myself. But at this moment we are their light. Wherever they are, at least they will now have some encouragement and know: We can do something. Wherever they are, they are human beings. They are not animals. That's why we have been given this chance." We are to be found living for the other.

In the third place, no matter the details on the ground, we are to live in hope. "Hope," theologian David Willis once wrote, "is the forward inclining of trust, the forward momentum of faith, born and nurtured, fed and disciplined, enjoyed and celebrated in the loving community which every day chooses life rather than death." The ordinary means of hope include though are not limited to "the extra mile walked, the next forgiveness practiced, the next cut bandaged, the next body interred, the next malicious rumor not shared, the next bill paid, the next coat given, the next letter written on behalf of, the next meal scraped together and served, the next chord struck and released, the next widow's mite offered...the next prodigal gesture of affection delighted in, the next hurt not repaid with hurt, the next feeble demonstration for a modicum of justice joined, the next batch of votes gotten out." We are to be found living in the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Day by day, of course, God finds us dying instead of really living: afraid for our lives, curved in on ourselves, hopeless if not despairing amid this present reign of death. That is why Jesus is on a road trip that will end on the cross. He alone lives with death behind him; he alone has given his life with nothing left over for others; he alone is our assurance of things hoped for. Truly I tell you, he is coming at this unexpected hour to serve us at the table he has prepared for us; he is breaking into our hearts even now, like a thief, to become the only treasure we need. Ready or not. Thanks be to God.