

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Do Not Be Afraid”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, August 11, 2019

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12:32-40

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 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. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

‘But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our lives, our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take whatever it is within us, the words or images that we have, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from scripture and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, transform all of these words so that they might become the word of Christ for us. The word of truth and peace and love and welcome. The word of mercy and freedom of grace, of justice. The word of Christ. And let that word minister to each of us by the mystery of your Spirit, speaking to our needs, our hurts, our wants, our desires. We ask this, I ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

This passage from the Gospel of Luke begins with those famous words do not be afraid. I am convinced that no matter what situation in life you face, if you remember those words in that moment where you're feeling a little bit constricted, do not be afraid, you are a person of faith. In the sense, Jesus' admonition to, do not be afraid, is the bedrock of our faith as Christians. Whether it's a call to serve on session or as deacons and you've never done that before and you say to yourself, "Well, I'm not sure I could do that. I'm not ready. I don't know enough. I'm not faithful enough." If you hear those words, do not be afraid, you will know that God's good graces are with you. You might respond and say yes. And you'll learn that God works with us where we

are, as we are, simply calling us to do whatever it is before us in faith. Whatever it is, however, we are, do not be afraid. There are many of these admonitions in this passage. Do not be afraid. Sell your possessions. Give alms and make purses. Be dressed for action. Be ready. It is in a sense, the list of things that we need to do in order to be attentive to the mystery of God and to honor what Christ is telling each of us to be about.

And as I was thinking about these things, I listed them on my whiteboard at home and I was sitting there looking at them trying to figure out all the connections. And instead of figuring out the connections, I heard the voice of a professor I had at Princeton seminary say to me and to all of my classmates, "You must always pay attention to the indicatives before the imperatives. Thanks." I heard it in theology class. I heard it in preaching class, we joked about it because it almost became a T-shirt. This was before the day of hashtags, but I'm sure indicatives before imperatives would've been a hashtag at Princeton Theological Seminary. What it means is simply, do not get lost in the to-do list. You must pay attention to the statements of fact that are the bedrocks of our faith before you talk about what you're supposed to do.

A lot of this came from Paul's letters. In his letters, if you break them down in the biggest sort of structural dynamic that you can think of from a literary standpoint, the first half of all of Paul's letters are the statements of fact. You are so beloved. You have an inheritance in the faith that is undefiled. You are renewed and forgiven and set free in Jesus Christ. Every letter begins with this gigantic statement of these positive things that God is doing for us. And every letter then sort of shifts into this dynamic of saying, "Okay. Because all that stuff is true, because Jesus rose on the third day and has forgiven us our sin, we need to love your neighbor as yourself." You need to put on the armor of God. You need to clothe yourselves with righteousness, peace, justice, love. All of the to-dos come after the statements of fact. All of the to-dos come after. That is our response. It is why, during our worship time, we have prayers and readings and songs and anthems and scripture before we go to that point where we say, "Okay. Please give your tithes and offerings," because we are providing the Word of God, and then the service shifts. Now it's up to you to respond to that Word; to give your tithes and offerings; to offer your prayers for the World, for our community, for ourselves; and then to go forth into the week and do good and be faithful. The service is set up just like Paul's letters, and all of it is, pay attention to the indicatives before you talk about the imperatives.

So what I want to do is, in a sense, set aside the commands for the invitations. And I want to focus not on do not be afraid and sell all your stuff and give it all away and make purses, but I want to lift up for us the things that are the bedrock of these invitations, at least in this passage. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid. For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." In English and in our present day, if we were writing instead of Jesus, who's writing in-- or speaking in a Aramaic mindset and the authors of the Gospel writing in a Greek mindset, we would say, "Your Father's good pleasure is to give you the Kingdom, so don't be afraid." We would do the indicative first before the imperative when we speak. We need to trust that it is God's good pleasure to give us the Kingdom. And that's just fancy-coated language for, to give you the blessings of God, to give you inclusion and love and comfort and care and and freedom and the power to go forth and to do good things. This is what it means that God is pleased to give you the kingdom. The next thing is after, be dressed for action and have your lamps lit - again an admonition and then there's a little bit of explanation - Jesus says the reason that we need to be ready is because God wants to come, fasten his belt, have a sitdown and he and God will come and serve us. That it's not just us going and doing and doing and doing. But that we need to spend time and be welcomed and fed and renewed in the promises of God. Either through communion, worship together, or in our daily devotionals. Our times of prayer are quiet. We need to luxuriate in the fact that every now and then God takes care of us and we can let go of control. And finally, in this passage at the very end, it says, "You must be ready because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

In a way, this sounds like a threat. God's going to come and you're not going to be ready. We're going to get you. But instead, it says, "We don't know." And rather than that being a threat or something that provokes fear we need to go back to the beginning, do not be afraid, and realize that we live completely in mystery. We do not know the mind of God. And again, rather than letting that hinder us we just need to do our best and be faithful. For as Thomas Merton says, "I don't know what your desire is but I hope my desire to do your will is good enough." And I think God would say, "Yes. Well done, good and faithful servant," if we simply try our best.

So God's promises are to give you the keys to the kingdom, to invite you and welcome you in, to serve you and care for you in a way that is mysterious and beyond our understanding. And so I want to talk about those things in a little bit different way. How do we allow ourselves to luxuriate in God's blessing for us? As I said, some of us come to worship, some of us are clear in what our time is in volunteer work and our contribution. Others of us sit in prayer or study the Bible. I want to offer a modern-day way that you can allow God to tend to you. It's called an electronic Sabbath. It is you simply shutting off every device that is

clamoring for your attention. Your phone, your laptop, your work computer, a television-- whatever it is, just shut it off. Lay the iPad down for an hour and just sit and breathe and allow the Spirit to work in your life in ways that you may not even be aware of. Take a timeout from everything in our technologically driven world, where you can just be and God can come and find you, and serve you, and minister to you.

As I was thinking about this and the passage and the list and trying to figure out the connections and heard the voice, something struck me is when it says you got to be ready because you never know when God is coming. And you never know what you're going to do when you're faced with that situation of being aware like, "Ooh, this is a big deal." And what came to me was something that happened the last week I was an undergrad at Seattle University. I was preparing for finals. I was in the coffee shop that I spent half my life at drinking coffee and reading and writing and getting ready for my theology exams. I walked a favorite Jesuit of mine, Kevin McGinley. He came right up to me and he said, "David, you're about to be expelled from Seattle U." What? In a blink, I saw my whole academic career like, "What did I do?" And he told me that when the room or the floor assistants were going through the rooms in one of the dorms, they ran across a friend of mine who was in a biology class years earlier, a parasitology class, and he had taken a microscope out of the science building and left it in his dorm room for years. And when they pressed him, he said, "Well, I wasn't the only one." "David, your name came up and you're in trouble." And I thought, "Oh-oh, what do I do?" And he said, "You need to go talk to Dr. Brubaker," who was the head of the science department. I immediately got up, went to the science building, found Dr. Brubaker and walked in and said, "Yes, I'm guilty. I did take a microscope out of the building. I did it two times, back to my dorm room and the next day I smuggled it back in and put it away. I wrapped it in towels. I carried it in a special bag. I made sure nothing happened to it and I returned it after each time." "Why did you do that? You know it's against the rules." And I said, "As the student that I was, I simply wanted to get an A on my drawings." We had to draw every little bug just right. Every cell. But in that moment, I knew I just needed to go and act and trust the process. I'd become a theology student. I spent years reading about grace and love and judgment and I wasn't sure what was going to happen. But when the time came, you just have to go and do it. Be ready. You never know. And sometimes you have to trust the mystery.

This whole sermon is an invitation for all of us to recenter our lives. Not on the list of things that we have to do again and again and again or either the list of Christian things that we glean from scripture but even the list of household chores that we need to do or the things that work. This is not where we need to center our lives in the busyness or the crossing off a to-do list. Instead, we need to center our being and our lives and our faith on the indicatives of God. That God by the power of Jesus Christ and the work of Christ has forgiven all of us. That God with the gift of the spirit accompanies all of us through whatever it is that we're facing. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou art with me. And finally, we need to recenter our lives on the fact that this is just a mystery. A fleeting moment in the history of creation are you and me. We don't know how it's going to turn out, we don't know everything that's going to happen, but what we know we are God's and God loves each of us. Let us center our lives on this truth and then work from there. Amen.