

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 11, 2019

Text: Luke 12:32-40

Title: Being Preparedⁱ

When you drive across the state line entering Maine, the signs proclaim: “Maine: The Way Life Should Be”. One of the pastors in Maine said that she thought Jesus would have appreciated that slogan and might have used it to proclaim, “The Kingdom of God: The Way Life Should Be.”ⁱⁱ

The concept of the “Kingdom of God” is very important to Luke and is referred to 47 times in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, also written by Luke. In today’s Gospel Jesus says that it is God’s pleasure to give us this kingdom. For most of us the whole concept of a “kingdom” is strange to us, but it wasn’t for the people of Jesus’ day. Their experience with kingdoms of Herod and Caesar was not something that would give them pleasure. I like the way Marcus Borg describes the “Kingdom of God”. “it is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not.”ⁱⁱⁱ Think about that image for a minute.

What would our earth look like if God were king or president instead of those who have held these positions in the past or hold them currently? This becomes a little more complicated for us to answer today because we have some very vocal “religious leaders” who, it seems to me, support practices that I definitely do not see as consistent with what Jesus taught us about God.

It is a challenge sometimes to set aside what we hear in the public media and step back and really look at what Jesus taught his followers. Some think of the Kingdom of God as only that time when Christ will come

again at the end of history, but for Luke it has both an “already” and a “not yet” sense about it. Jesus has introduced the kingdom to us, but it has not yet been fully realized. It is probably the longest construction project ever known.

I remember as a teenager attending some revival meetings where what we heard was that we’d better repent of our sins and get right with God before we left there because we might die on the way home. For me, this is one of the unfortunate ways that preachers and others have often tried to get people to accept Jesus as their savior – as a way to avoid eternal punishment. But Jesus tells us that it’s not about eternal punishment but rather about receiving the blessings that God has for us, not only sometime in the future, but today in our everyday life.

You see, the “Kingdom of God” isn’t about a remote God sitting somewhere watching everything we are doing, ready to catch us whenever we do something wrong. Rather the Kingdom of God is about a God who loves each of us deeply and cares about every single part of our lives. This is a God who cares about the wildflowers of the field and the sparrow, not just about the highly cultivated orchid and the majestic bald eagle. This is a God who cares about every hair on our heads and every joy and sorrow we feel.

This is a God who loves us so much that one of the illustrations Jesus uses here is of servants being prepared to welcome their master late at night, opening the door when he returns and then getting the surprise of their lives. Servants would expect that when their master returned from a long trip, they should be prepared to serve him a meal, unpack his suitcase, turn down his bed and attend to his needs. However, in this instance, Jesus says that when the master returns and finds the servants

prepared and waiting for him, the master will tell the servants to sit down and the master, himself, will serve them. Can you imagine that?

Jesus didn't just talk about this; he lived it. Remember that on the last night that he would be with his disciples, the night that he would be betrayed, the night when he had a lot of important things to still say to them, he took time to give them a sermon in action – not words. Jesus - the host, the teacher, the savior – took on the role of a servant and washed his disciples' feet. God is a God of surprises!

I invite you to think about the times in your life, or the life of this church where you have experienced and felt God's presence with you in unexpected ways. Have there been times when as an individual you felt you just couldn't go on, didn't know where you would get the energy or motivation to do the next thing that needed to be done? At those times, did you recognize God reaching out through a phone call from someone who cared, a person showing up at just the right time, something special that let you know that God was there and that God cared and would sustain you?

Sometimes we only recognize this as God's presence much later when we look back on it. As a church have there been times when there was great missional energy and growth and you knew God was guiding you? Have there been times when you relied on some of the giants of faith in this congregation to be patient and calm in the face of crisis and exemplify their trust in God's plan for the future?^{iv}

God comes to us in surprising ways to offer comfort, assurance and treasure that lasts. When we are intentional about opening our eyes, ears, and hearts we may be amazed to see the surprising ways that God reaches out to us in our daily lives. Jesus tells us we don't need to be afraid because God isn't looking to punish us but instead to bless us with a

life that is lived the way God wants us to live. God wants us to live in a world where people are focused on sharing love with others instead of asserting and preserving our own power and control.

It can be so easy as we look around us to be afraid. Our current political climate encourages us to be afraid of those who look or think differently than us. Have you ever noticed that the message of angels in the Bible frequently begins with the words “Do not be afraid”? Today, that is Jesus word as well, “Do not be afraid.” We can be assured that Jesus did not mean this as a scolding or a judgment, but rather as something comforting because he calls us his “little flock” and term of endearment.

It is not very different than the times when we hug or console a frightened child. As Christians we need to be aware that fear is a human response and that it can impede our perception of God’s will and God’s ways at work in our lives.^v Fear can prevent us from seeing great opportunities and possibilities. Fear can prevent us from seeing the good in other people.

So, Jesus tells us “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” We can be so focused on what we think we need to do that we are not able to recognize God’s presence or see what God has already done. So Jesus tells us to be prepared, to focus on the treasures of heaven, to use our possessions and our time to enact the values and agenda of God’s kingdom here in the present, in our daily lives, even as we look forward to its ultimate coming in the future.

William Barclay, in his daily Bible Study guide to Luke asks how we want God to find us either on that day when Jesus returns, or when our earthly life ends, or when on a daily basis we live our lives as God’s beloved children and as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. He suggests that

there are three things that are important here as touch stones for how we want God to find us.

First, we want God to find us with our work complete. Now, I know that at the end of the day, it is almost impossible for us to say our work is done. Indeed, for many, the feeling is that we are so far behind we will never catch up with everything that we think we need to do. In John's Gospel (17:4) as Jesus prays for his disciples he says, "I have finished the work that you gave me to do." How is that even possible? Surely there were more people to be healed, more miracles to perform, more sermons to be given. Yet, Jesus, in confidence could say that he had finished the work God had given him to do.

It is in this sense, of our work being done that we want God to find us. Have we done the things that are truly important to God? Have we loved those whom God has placed in our midst? Have we been faithful to God; putting that priority first in the daily decisions we make? At the end of the day or at the end of our life will God find us with our work complete?

Secondly, we want God to find us at peace with one another. I'm thinking that this is one of many reasons why I can't even begin to imagine myself in the political realm. I can't imagine attacking another person's character, actions, or motivations. That doesn't mean that I will not challenge or question someone, but at the end of the day, I want to be at peace with those whom God loves. As Christians, I believe, we have a wonderful opportunity to model being able to disagree with another person while still being at peace with him or her.

Finally, we want God to find us at peace with God. God and I have not always been at peace with each other. There have been times when I

have been disobedient and rebellious not wanting to do what God seemed so clearly to be telling me to do.

One of those really difficult times involved God's call to me to enter parish ministry. I did not want to do it. I am an off the charts introvert and I hated it every time we had children's day at church, and we had to stand up and recite a poem. My father would make me practice so that I knew my lines and so that I could speak loudly enough to be heard. I hated to speak in front of people; how could God possibly want me to be a pastor?

I wasn't good enough. There were problems in my marriage. I had a child with some special needs. Surely God had the wrong person. But let me tell you, God is persistent. Eventually, I came to understand that **if** this was really what God was calling me to be and do, and **if** I called Jesus the Lord of my life, then for me to keep saying no to God was sin. It put a huge wedge between God and me. Finally, on a Good Friday, the day of death, my rebellious will died. I didn't immediately say yes, but I stopped saying no. I was sure that once I stopped fighting, God would realize that I wasn't the right person and I would be off the hook.

Clearly, that wasn't what happened. When I stopped saying no, and started saying, "maybe" and then a tentative "yes" it was like Easter on Good Friday. New life began on that day and I have never once regretted that decision to say yes to God, to choose to be at peace with God, to allow God to have ultimate control and to put God first. The obstacles I saw as mountains, became small hills. The ride has been amazing. I have been stretched in so many ways and had experiences I could never have imagined.

God has a plan for each and every one of us and that plan is different for each of us. I pray that you are living out the plan that God has for you

rather than fighting with God about it. At the same time, I encourage you to be open to whatever changes in course might be part of God's plan. Be willing to take a risk when God calls you to try something new. You may be surprised at the wonderful blessings that will come from it. Whatever it is in your life, I pray that God will find you at peace with God.

I read recently a story on Facebook that I have seen before. It is a story of a man on a long flight. On the flight were 10 soldiers heading for some training before being deployed to Afghanistan. He heard a couple of them whispering to each other about whether or not they would purchase the inflight lunch. He noticed that none of the soldiers purchased the lunch.

He went to the flight attendant and gave the attendant enough money to pay for lunch for the ten soldiers. Later two other passengers who had observed this gave him money toward the cost of the meals. When they all disembarked, he saw the soldiers gathered together and when they thanked him for the lunch, he thanked them for their service, and gave them the money that the other passengers had given him, telling them to be sure and stop for a snack on the rest of their trip.

He said that for him it was just a natural thing to do. He didn't even think twice about it. For me, this is a simple example of someone who at the end of the day had responded to an opportunity to be the hands and feet of Christ for someone else; an example of someone who took action when it was presented to him. I don't know whether he was a man of faith, but he was a man who at least in that incident was living in ways that helped manifest the kingdom of God.

Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom... Be dressed for action... You must be ready..." Let us live our lives in such a way that at the end of the day, we

can rest comfortably with God; knowing that our work is done, we are at peace with others, and we are at peace with God.

Look for the blessing of God.

ⁱ There are large portions of this sermon that are taken directly from the sermon I preached on 8/7/16.

ⁱⁱ Annie Baker Streevy wrote this in her newsletter in August 2016. I used this in a sermon at that time.

ⁱⁱⁱ Borg, Marcus J. The Heart of Christianity, p.132

^{iv} Feasting on the Word

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