

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Living in Ordinary Time: Expectations”  
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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 12:32-40

It has just been one of those weeks.

I knew it was going to be hectic. My son was in orchestra camp. The Kenya mission team, including two staff members, was leaving. A mission team from New York was staying at the church. There were meetings, and mission projects, and pastoral duties piled high on my plate. And so I had been preparing. Stockpiling my fridge and pantry, worrying about any last-minute things I could help the Kenya team with, fretting over details for the Back-to-School Rally in Pontiac.

I thought I had the week all planned out. I thought I was ready. But, as often happens, things didn't go according to plan. Visits ran late, meetings got added (and forgotten), circumstances changed. And as my days unraveled, I felt like I was watching my treasured plans spilling out of a gaping hole in my worn-out purse.

I could try to justify my drive this week, and most weeks, to over prepare, to fret and worry over the tiniest details. Losing sleep over whether or not I need to wash my son's camp t-shirt or respond to an email feels like I am “dressed and ready for action with my lamp lit.” But the truth is, I'm not compelled by virtue. I'm compelled by fear. Fear of judgement, perhaps. Or loss. Fear of whatever may happen if I'm not ready for it. And I know I'm not alone in this fear.

We have come to translate “keep your lamps lit” as “burn the candle at both ends.” We feel it is our responsibility to prepare for every possibility. Whether the task at hand is raising our children or meeting our career goals or even trying to follow Jesus, we look up to those people who not only have a stellar “plan A” but also plans B through Q in place. We don't want to be sidelined by surprises or derailed by missed details.

And this is because we are all driven by fear. After every disaster, every tragedy, we comb through the evidence to sort out how this could have been avoided. Public judgement is pronounced on every missed clue, every minor flaw, every delayed response. “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” is not good enough. He should have known. He should have had a better security system.

So then, what do we do with Jesus' entreaty, “do not be afraid, little flock?”

Just before the words of Jesus we read today, Jesus tells his assembled flock of disciples, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.” He tells them God knows what they need, and just like God cares for birds and flowers, God will take care of them as well.

If you ask me, this sounds massively irresponsible. But then I think about this week. Would it have been the end of the world if I hadn’t washed my son’s camp t-shirt three times? Did I really need to worry about that? Would it have been a total disaster if we had run out of food for the youth group and had to go out to buy some more? Maybe Jesus had the right idea, after all. When Jesus describes the servants waiting for their master, they aren’t pacing the floor, scrubbing the kitchen, fretting over whether the master is going to want eggs or muffins for breakfast.

Rather, they are waiting in joyful expectation. Their only job is to be awake and aware. To tend to their lamps, encourage the light so that they can see the master approaching. To open the door for him when he arrives. They are not fearing punishment if the master is displeased. But they do receive a blessing when their vigil is over. If they were afraid – of losing their jobs, their status, their shelter – whatever it is they treasure – if they were focusing on these fears instead of looking for their master, they would surely fail to be awake with their lamps lit when the master arrived. Because fear is exhausting. We are wired for short-term fear response, fight or flight. Our bodies can only sustain a racing heart, panting breath, and adrenaline rush for so long. And then we shut down.

When my son was very young, he had a minor head injury that landed him in the hospital overnight. Everything looked fine, but the nurses would check him regularly throughout the night just to make sure. My husband and I were understandably fearful about our son’s condition, and determined we would stay up through the night to watch him. Neither of us made it. While it was a fitful and often-interrupted night of sleep, our bodies could not sustain that level of fear without rest.

Unlike fear, however, sustained attentiveness can be regenerative. Think of children listening attentively for the bells of Santa’s sleigh. They manage to stay awake for an impressive length of time on Christmas Eve, do they not? And they seem to be full of energy when they awake on Christmas morning. They are waiting in joyful expectation. They are focused on one thing.

And that is what Jesus encourages his disciples to do. Do not be afraid. Focus on one thing – the kingdom of God. And we do this through sustained attentiveness, joyful expectation of that coming kingdom, that time and place where what we treasure most will be eternal. Because if we don’t follow Jesus’ instructions on this – if we are afraid, if we lose focus, if we are anxious and distracted – we will miss the kingdom of heaven when it arrives.

Now, I know this sounds like some far-off fairy-tale end-times babble. But I’m not talking about the end of the world, and neither is Jesus. For Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is always present and future. It is inaugurated in Christ’s coming and will keep coming until it is complete. The kingdom of heaven is not a place or an event or an endpoint. It is a process. Like evolution. Like fermentation. Like photosynthesis. The creation itself, it’s very operation, is saturated with the kingdom of heaven.

And even in the center of my wild week, even as I kept pouring my treasured energy into that worn-out purse of earthly concern, the kingdom of heaven kept showing up. I saw it in the mission team from New York packing backpacks in Pontiac. I saw it in meetings with church members who are passionate in their love for this community and their desire to see it flourish. I saw it in folks in the hospital who are experiencing the healing power of love and prayers. I saw it in the Kenya mission team's photographs. In all those places where God so clearly stepped in to take care of things, to work things out, to give what was most needed.

The kingdom of heaven is not always experienced in a dramatic event. Often it is a slow unfolding. A long night of waiting. And so we will only see it if we are attentive. If we are nurturing the light. It may not come right away. There may be many hours of darkness ahead as you wait. Like any process, the kingdom of heaven is sometimes hard to see. Sometimes it is almost invisible. But if our lamps are lit, if we are awake and attentive and joyfully expectant, we sometimes hear a footfall, or catch a whiff of its scent on the wind, or see a faint light coming toward us in the distance. And we are reminded that it is coming.

So do not be afraid. Keep your lamps lit. In the center of your worries, your fears, whatever anxieties plague you most, wait in joyful expectation for the kingdom of heaven to arrive. In your career, in your broken relationships, in your neighborhood, in your depression, in your illness or injury, in your boredom or apathy, wait in joyful expectation for the kingdom of heaven to arrive. For when it arrives, if you have not fallen asleep, exhausted by fear, you will be blessed. God will invite us to sit down, take a load off, as God Almighty puts on an apron and sets us a feast.

And so we wait, in joyful expectation, replacing our fear with trust and gratitude, feeding the light that has been entrusted to us.

Let us pray:

Loving God,

we are grateful that it has been your good pleasure to give us the kingdom.

Keep us attentive in joyful expectation,

ever watchful for signs of your kingdom on earth. Amen.