

First Presbyterian Church
Life Lessons from Luke: Preparing
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Genesis 15:1-6; Luke 12:32-40

It was one of my most sacred rituals of preparation. It began the morning of game day. I would begin by putting on my socks, first regular socks and then those tall baseball socks with colored stripes and stirrups at the bottom. I would carefully pull them up to be sure I hadn't outgrown them. Then would come my t-shirt team jersey with my name and number on the back. This was followed by the hand-me-down baseball pants passed from family to family. To finish my attire, I added the colored belt which matched my jersey. Finally, I put on my cleats. Once I was appropriately dressed, I was on my bike and off to Bayland Park in Houston where all the Little League and Pony League games were played. I would find the appropriate field and the ritual continued. The second part of the ritual included finding the canvas gear bag, filled with chalk dust and dirt, pulling out my catcher shin guards and strapping them on. This was followed by the chest protector and then warming up the pitcher. The ritual concluded with a throw to second base, putting on my mask, and crouching behind the first batter. This was my ritual of preparation that I followed all the years I played baseball. And I have to say that this ritual was about as holy a ritual as I ever engaged in as a child.

Ritual preparation. We all do it. I would guess that almost everyone here has engaged in some ritual of preparation, even if we didn't call it that. So let me ask, "How many of you had or have a ritual of preparation for getting ready for work or school?" You get up at the same time; you eat the same thing; you drive the same route; you take the kids to the same bus stop; you stop for coffee at the same place. Or perhaps you have a ritual of preparation for a holiday. Maybe at Thanksgiving, you buy the same food, prepare it the same way, and you watch the Lions lose the same way as all the rest of us. Or maybe at Christmas, when you either buy a tree or get out your fake tree on the same day, cover it with the same ornaments, put up the lights in the same fashion, wear the same Christmas sweater, and once again prepare to eat the same food and watch the Lions lose. As human beings we are creatures of habit and as such we adopt rituals of preparation for almost every element of our lives.

I offer these thoughts on rituals of preparation because our Luke story this morning is about a ritual of preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God. The coming Kingdom of God had been the focus of much of Jesus' ministry. And as most of us are aware, this is not the only time Jesus speaks about the coming Kingdom. He proclaimed it. He embodied it. He predicted it. And in this teaching moment Jesus is asking his followers to prepare for it. And not only to prepare for it, but to be so prepared for its arrival that when the Kingdom arrived, they would be ready to receive it. He speaks of giving away their possessions, giving alms, being alert, being ready to open the door, and staying awake while waiting. These are all great images and the earliest church took them all seriously. Early Christians were attuned to this

sense of expectancy that any moment the Kingdom would come. In fact, in the church in Thessalonica, some Christians took Jesus's words so seriously that they gave away all they had and ceased working because they expected to see the Kingdom at any moment. Unfortunately, what this meant was that other Christians were having to feed and house them, and so the Apostle Paul tells them to get back to work. As time went by, the church struggled with what rituals of preparation for the Kingdom's arrival ought to look like when the Kingdom never came. And now after 2,000 years and no Kingdom, the question for us is, what does a ritual of preparation look like for this event of the coming Kingdom, when it might not arrive in our lifetimes?

The answer, I believe, can be found in the images that Jesus offers to his followers. And what he offers is a two-step ritual of preparation. Step one is turning. Let me explain. The first image is that Jesus' followers were to sell their possessions, give alms, and build up a heavenly bank account. This image takes us back to last week's sermon where we talked about not holding our possessions too closely and pretending that they are of eternal value. When Jesus tells his followers to sell their possessions, it is hyperbole, in the sense that Jesus doesn't expect people to sell all that they have and become mendicant beggars on the street...after all Jesus often stayed with people of means and accepted the hospitality of their possessions. What it means is that we are to turn our attention from those things that rust, wear out, and have no eternal value, and turn our attention to God's desires for this world. Think of it as turning our heads from looking in one direction to looking in another. So, step one is to turn, such that our focus is on God in Christ and not on things.

Step two is serving. What I find interesting about this second set of images about being alert, waiting for the master to return, and keeping our candles lit, is that the church has depicted these as inactive waiting. Think of a servant sitting in a chair simply looking out the window, trying to stay awake until his or her master arrived. In my opinion, this completely misses the point of Jesus focusing on servants as those who wait. In the first century anyone listening to Jesus would find such an interpretation a bit absurd. It was absurd because any servant who sat around waiting for his or her master would be in trouble when the master returned. Servants had particular roles to fulfill. They had tasks to perform. They were responsible for keeping a household running, or a farm producing, while the master was away. They were to do what the master asked them to do. And if we had kept reading in Luke, we would read Jesus saying, "Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions." (Luke 12:43-44) What this means for us is that our ritual of preparation begins with turning toward God to discover what we ought to be doing, serving, and then going out and doing so.

As Presbyterians we spend very little time talking about this "Kingdom coming" moment. I would argue that there are good reasons for this, including Jesus telling his followers that no one except God knows when it will happen. Even so, we are called to the ritual of preparation; the ritual of turning to God and of serving our neighbor. My challenge to you on this communion Sunday is, as you take the bread and cup, ask yourselves, how am I turning and serving the Christ who turned toward and served me?