

Sermon – “Dressed for Action”
Sunday, August 4, 2019
Scripture Readings: Luke 12:13-21, Luke 12:22-40
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Our first reading comes from Luke chapter 12, verses 13-21, a passage in which Jesus is teaching a crowd of followers. Hear now from the Word of God:

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

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Our second reading continues directly from the first, continuing from the same passage. Listen for God’s Word to you in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, verses 22 through 40.

²² He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

³² “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ 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. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

³⁵ “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹ “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. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

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The twelfth and thirteenth chapters of Luke are a very intriguing mixture of warning and reassurance, both themes intertwined in a surprising way. “You fool!” the rich man is told. “This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”¹

But also, “Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you?”²

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”³

But then, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit,”⁴ we hear, and “You must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”⁵

It is so easy to hear one but not the other. Worry about nothing; be comforted, for your needs shall be met. *Hakuna Matata*, we might say, were we to jump from the Biblical canon to the Disney canon.⁶ This is pleasing, and refreshing, and attractive to a certain side of ourselves. Unsurprisingly so, for it harkens back to the days of Genesis, of Eden, where humanity was first planted and to which it longs to return.⁷

For Adam there was no “worry about [his] life, what [he would] eat, or about [his] body,” nor, apparently, about “what [he would] wear. We are tempted to hear and dwell here only, in the reassuring words, even though we no longer live in Adam’s world.

Or we might have ears only for the warnings. This, too, is part of our inborn nature, if, perhaps, an only slightly more recent piece of it. Ever since the day the first two left that garden, there has been the knowledge, the awareness and fear, that there is an end reached, a

¹ Luke 12:20 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Luke 12:27-28a (*NRSV*).

³ Luke 12:32 (*NRSV*).

⁴ Luke 12:35a (*NRSV*).

⁵ Luke 12:40 (*NRSV*).

⁶ “Hakuna Matata” a Swahili phrase meaning something like “no problems”, was popularized in the United States by the Disney film *The Lion King* as a name for a philosophy of having no worries about anything.

⁷ See Genesis 2-3.

day when our illusions of endlessness are taken from us in an instant and our mortality undeniable at the last. There are those who obsess over signs and reminders of the nearness of the end, but they are only clinging a bit too frantically to something which is a part of us all, for the need to see and remember that the end is near is nothing more or less than a manifestation of the need for meaning.

Lest I be misunderstood, I do not intend to suggest that a life is meaningful *because* it comes to an end. There are those who do have a philosophy like that, which holds that things are imbued with significance only when, and specifically because, they are temporary and will soon pass away. There are snippets of this philosophy scattered throughout our present culture, thinking that believes there is no lasting meaning, only the meaning we invent and carry for the short span of days that is ours. It is a very sad philosophy, for it begins already resigned to the assumption that there is no resurrection and no eternity for anything, or certainly, at least, not for us.

No, what I mean when I say that warnings of our mortality have a magnetic draw to us, which we just can't help weaving into our lives and culture as humans, as expressed in everything from motivational speaking to classic fables, serious literature to pop phrases such as "you only live once;" and that the attraction of these things is tied deeply to our need for meaning, is that we know the warnings are true. We know that things end, and we also know that we are a distractible sort of creature, well prepared to fritter away our lives on nothing at all; and we *care* about this problem. We long for meaning, and so we pine for the things which point us back at it.

It may depend on our personal character, and it may depend on what part of life we are in, whether we are tempted to spend all our time in the place of encouraging assurances and avoid anything which casts uneasiness into that comfortable space, or to anxiously hear nothing but warning and worry, aware of the danger ahead and remembering not our foundation of hope.

But Jesus in Luke 12 and 13 does not allow us to sit with either of those things alone. "Do not be the fool who dies having pursued only wealth," he cautions. "Do not be afraid," he also says...leading into a further discourse warning his disciples to keep alert and watch out! Fear—and fear not, too—but also fear, we might hear in this.

These things go together better than it might appear at first glance. For Jesus's "fear not" is never quite the "fear not" that we wish for it to be and try to transform it into—it is not *The Lion King's hakuna matata* philosophy at all. It is not about being without responsibility, without care, without work—life as a sort of endless Jimmy Buffett song.

When Jesus speaks of not worrying ourselves about our needs, and trusting that the Lord who provides for the ravens and the lilies cares for us far more than them, this is not an invitation to live as if and everything's cool and good, nothing is particularly required of us, and nothing we do or don't do matters all that much. Quite the opposite. It is part, in fact, of a command implying that it does matter very much for us to choose one thing rather than another. We are being told that one thing is of the utmost importance—the kingdom of heaven—and that the other thing—the kingdom of this world—is not what we should be about

nor be the focal point of our desires and priorities. God knows of our worldly needs, and God is someone we can trust as a provider, so we should relax our clutching hands and release all of that in favor of the pursuit of something else.

And Jesus's "You better watch out, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" may be something we are mis-hearing as well. Sometimes we hear all this apocalyptic talk, of which there is a fair amount in the Gospels,⁸ and respond with puzzled and disturbed feelings, because, well, what are we to make of weird and abstract, symbolic talk of the end of the world, anyway? But is it talk of the end of the world? It is not probably wrong to read it this way. But it is not probably *right* to read it *only* this way.

When Jesus tells us the end will come, and at an hour we do not expect, he isn't, in fact, telling us anything we don't one hundred percent objectively know to be true already. Is the end near? Well, I don't know about the world, but *your* end is pretty near, and so is mine. How near? Well, the human lifespan is simply not that long, and it is a fragile thing, capable of being interrupted at any moment. Or, in Biblical language, none of us knows the day nor the hour.

What I am saying is that there is a temptation sometimes to be dismissive of "the end is near"-type passages in the Bible just because we figure nobody who has ever predicted the end of the world has ever been right, so anyone who figures the end is about now is probably wrong, too. But (besides also being a misunderstanding of how probability works) that's missing the point. When Jesus speaks of being ready to meet him at any moment, that applies both to those who are around whenever this whole world should reach its conclusion *and* to those of us whose *personal* conclusion is right around the corner...which is to say, all of us.

So what is going on in Luke 12? It is about our need for meaning as I mentioned earlier, coming at it from both sides at once: warning us that we do not have forever and will reach the end having lived for important things or having lived for unimportant things; and at the same time assuring us that God cares for us and provides for us, and that our trust in God can be firm enough to free us up from worry about letting go of what we are asked to let go of.

We are told here that the things about which we are tempted to care most, the things of this world, are not the things to which we should wed ourselves, not the things that should be our focus. Why? First, because God is a trustworthy provider here on earth. Second, because the things of this world are of little importance by comparison to the treasures of heaven, which we can also trust that God will provide. But ultimately, this is speaking of a spiritual fight for our souls.

"[W]here your treasure is, there your heart will be also,"⁹ Jesus declares. If I treasure the things of this world, my heart is here, and my life is here, and my commitment is here. This is where I have planted myself. If I treasure the things of heaven, my heart is there, my life is there, and my commitment is there. That is what I am living for and toward.

⁸ See Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 17, and Luke 21, to feature specifically the words of Jesus himself. Quite a bit more apocalyptic language can be found in several of the Old Testament prophets and in the book of Revelation.

⁹ Luke 12:34 (NRSV).

So the deep question here that Jesus is asking us is this: to what course and destiny will we attach our own souls? How dreadful a mistake it will be, we are warned, to put our fortunes into treasures that sail on the ship of this world, knowing perfectly well from the beginning, without any question at all, that that ship will sink and be gone! How much wiser to pin our hopes on another vessel, one impervious to wind and wave, even though it may yet remain just over the horizon, where we can only glimpse its sail and its flag, and we do not know quite when it will dock! We can remain tied to the one as it slips under the water, or be ready to board the other when it arrives.

He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

“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 unfailling 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.”¹⁰

Amen.

¹⁰ Luke 12:22-36 (NRSV).