

Be Ready

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Preaching on:

Luke 12:32–40

The last two weeks I've been preaching to you about prayer and about change. And I think that the opening of our scripture reading this morning is a perfect encapsulation of the messages that have been in the preaching over the last two weeks. The first being, you don't know what you're going to get in this life. Even if you pray, you don't always know what you're going to get. And the second being that nothing in this world lasts forever and that none of the things that make us feel comfortable and safe in this world—our possessions, our money, our prestige, our home, even our relationships—can keep us safe and comfortable forever.

But Jesus says there is something that can keep us happy, meaningful, safe forever. So let's read this, "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 and unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." When you come to the realization that nothing in this world is going to last for you forever, except for God, except for faith and hope and love, and that the things and the possessions of this

world are all going to go up and down and they're all going to change, when you come to that realization and you stop praying to God to say, "I expect my every prayer to be answered exactly the way that I prayed it. I want to get exactly what I want, because what I want is good and just and fair and necessary. And if I don't get it, I'm going to suffer, and I'm not going to be happy. And I'm going to be in pain," and you start to say to God, "I am willing to accept whatever it is that you are giving, because that is life, and this life is good," it begins to free you. It frees you. And what it frees you to do is to be generous. It frees you not to constantly be grasping at the things of this world and trying to hold onto them as tight as you can because you think that the things of this world are somehow going to save you, that God can give you things that will save you.

But that's not the way that God works. God doesn't give you things to save you. God gives us something else to save us. And so when you realize that the things of this world are not the final answer to the troubles that we live through, to the questions that we have, to the pain that we feel, you become free to live like a disciple of Jesus: to be generous even if you only have a little bit, because you don't need to hold onto it. It frees you to love everybody even if you don't like everybody, because there is enough love to go around. It frees you to act in the service of your neighbors. Why? Because you don't have to be afraid of what it means to lose that time. You don't have to be afraid of what happens if I get in trouble for going on that March? Or what if people don't like me when I speak up about that issue? That's not the stuff that matters. What matters is your relationship to God. That's the foundation. That's everything. So we can be generous and loving and kind.

But still we struggle a little bit. We struggle with God who we believe to be powerful and good, who doesn't seem to answer every prayer in exactly the way that we would hope that every prayer would be answered. And we see this, right? We see that some people pray for very good things, to be healed, and yet they're not healed. To be lifted up out of poverty, and yet they're not lifted up out of poverty. For their children to be safe, and yet, in some cases, their children are not safe the way they want them to be safe, their loved ones are not safe. And this always makes us wonder, what is the character of the God that we love and worship? What is the character of the God we love and worship, who doesn't always seem to give us the fair, or the just, or the right, or the kind thing, even when we pray, even when we ask?

There are a couple of ways that we have answered this question throughout our history, right? One of them is that when things go wrong in your life and you're not getting exactly what you think you deserve, or what's fair, it's because you are being punished for something, right? If you think back long enough, you'll remember some awful thing you did or said, or didn't do that you should have done, some thought you had, some deed you did. And the reason that you are suffering now, even though you're praying for something else in your life is because you're being punished for that thing that you did. It's your own fault. That's the way it works. And this has been a very popular reasoning for suffering throughout all of history. There's one problem with it. And there's a lot of Christians and I think there's a little bit of all of us who kind of believes this, right? We always kind of say to ourselves, when

something goes completely wrong, "What did I do to deserve this?" It's sort of just built right into the culture, built right into the psychology. But the problem is Jesus seems to totally reject this idea. When the disciples and Jesus come across a man who has been blind from birth (And the popular opinion at the time was that if you had anything that was wrong with you, it was because you had committed some sort of sin), and the disciples couldn't quite figure out if he had been born blind, what could he have done to deserve it? And so they were arguing amongst one another, "Well, he must have done something even when he was very, very small." And then some of the other disciples must have been saying, "No, I think it was his parents who must have done something to make him blind. That's why he's blind." So they went to Jesus and they said, "Hey, answer this debate for us. Who was the sinner? Was it him or his parents that he was born blind?" And Jesus says, "Ah, forget that. The whole thing is wrong. Nobody had sinned. That's not what this is about." Jesus seems to just step away from the idea that you are being punished and that's why you're suffering.

So then there comes another idea about God that's very popular, and I'm sure that we all hold this in our hearts as well. And this is the idea that there is some sort of great plan at play in the world. And everything that happens to you and everything that happens in the world, God has ordained that it's going to happen or is allowing it to happen because it is a part of this great master plan. And in the end, everything's going to turn out okay. Even though the world might be burning right now, even though you might be suffering right now, in the end, it's all going to turn out okay. There's a couple of problems with this. One is the issue of free will. We know that we have free will so if God has ordained that something should happen, do I really have free will? But I think the bigger issue is what kind of a God who has the power to step in and stop a tragedy from happening—and that God is all good, we believe that God is good—then why doesn't God step in to stop the tragedy from happening?

What does that mean about God? And a popular answer to this is that, well, God's goodness is different than our human conception of what goodness is, right? And in fact, God is just. And so the fact that there is suffering and pain and tragedy and disaster and injustice in this world, and that God isn't fixing it all for us when we pray for it to be fixed is just because God is just, and in the great picture of justice, it is right for all of us to be suffering through all of these things and it's going to get us to God's justice in the end in some way. But again, that sort of comes back to this idea that we are all suffering because of something that we've done wrong, right? This idea that we are being punished in some sense, or not being healed because of some kind of injustice in our past, or some kind of imperfection within us that we can't do anything about. And that seems to be something that Jesus rejected when he said, "Nobody is being punished for a sin," in this particular instance of the blind man who is born blind.

So what kind of God do we have? What does God ask of us? What does God want from us? Well, in the second part of our scripture reading, I think that Jesus gives us the answer, be dressed for action and have your lamps lit, be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet. 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." Our God is a God who is putting the impetus on us, yeah? God is putting the impetus on us. He is saying to me, and to you, "This is the way the world works. I need you to be ready. I need you to be paying attention. I can't have you giving up. I can't have you losing hope. You need to be as ready as if you are expecting me to rush back into your life at any moment, because even in the midst of disaster, and even in the midst of suffering, I am right at the edges and my kingdom is right there already waiting to respond. And if you are not ready for that, if you have given up because of the hardship and the trials and the suffering and the pain, what will you see?" Well, you won't see anything.

It's our readiness that enables us to see God's action in the world. And it is our readiness that enables us to be God's hands in this world. Be ready, be ready. Watch. God is already at work in this world. And in all the trials and all the difficulties of our lives, none of which are... Not all of them are ever going to be perfectly solved, right? If everything could be perfectly solved, then everything would be perfectly solved by just praying for it and wanting it. And just by it being the right thing. But that is not the way it works. You and I need to be involved. That is the world that God has given us.

And so it's not that prayer isn't answered. I believe that prayer is answered. It's just not answered in the way that we always expect for it to be answered. Because if we are asking for God to give us the things and the comforts in this world, even health and relationships and love or possessions and money, if we are looking for things in this world that will make us more comfortable in this world, that is not how prayer works. But if we are coming to God in prayer to say to God, "I am ready for you to enter into my life, to enter into this struggle, to enter into this difficulty, into these blessings, into these strengths and weaknesses so that I can act for you and for my neighbors" that is when prayer is always answered. That is the prayer that God always responds to exactly the way we hope.

"I will be with you until the end of the age, and you don't know what you're going to get. And the blessings that you have, they might not always be there. And the hardships that you hope will never come in your life may come, but whatever may come, I will be there with you if you are ready for me to be there with you." Now beloved what I'm not saying is I'm not saying that money doesn't matter. I'm not saying that health doesn't matter. I'm not saying that your relationships and your family don't matter. I'm not saying that the things of this world don't matter. I am saying that our faith tells us that there is something that matters more. And in prayer, we connect to that One who matters more. And we say to God, "I am ready. Whatever may come, whatever may come, I am ready."