

Don't worry, be Ready
Luke 12:32-40, Philippians 2:12-18
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The neighbourhood around the manse is filled with rabbits. Every time we go for a walk, we spot at least two or three of them, grazing on people's lawns or warming themselves in a patch of sunlight, and they are incredibly comfortable around humans – as long as you're very quiet, and you don't make any sudden movements, they'll let you get pretty close to them before they decide to bound off towards their burrow. Of course, when you're walking with Calvin and Lewis, staying quiet with no sudden movements isn't so easy. They think they're being sneaky, but they just can't help themselves – inevitably one of them will giggle, or just decide to jump or shout for no reason, and the rabbits will disappear. If you're trying not to scare someone, you've got to stay calm and quiet and not make any sudden movements.

And I thought about those rabbits when I read our scripture passage this week from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has just finished telling his disciples a challenging parable about the rich man who builds up barns filled with wealth that he will never get to enjoy, and maybe he figured they needed some encouragement after such a tough lesson, because he decides to give them some really good news, this amazingly encouraging and comforting message: Don't Worry. Don't worry about your possessions, about food or clothing, all these things you need,

because God will provide those things for you, just like he provides for the birds of the air, just like he clothes the lilies of the field, he will care for you, so Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. You have nothing to worry about. Everything is wonderful. Calm, quiet, soothing, peaceful. And then, when you least expect it – Wham! Be dressed for action, have your lamps lit, be like those who are waiting for their master to return. The master returns like a thief in the night – so you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour – the kingdom could be coming ANY SECOND NOW, so BE PREPARED. We go from this gentle, calm, soothing message telling us not to worry, and so we exhale, and we relax, and then suddenly out of nowhere, Jesus is in High Alert mode, warning the disciples that if they let our guard down for a minute, they will miss out. Jesus could come back at any moment, so everybody look busy, get your shirt tucked in and your carpets vacuumed, shine your shoes and tidy your hair, stop relaxing and FREAK OUT because the Son of Man is coming and we've got to be ready when he comes. Jesus tells his followers not to worry, and then he tells them something that seems designed to cause them to worry. So as his followers, what are we supposed to do?

Well, I don't think it's an accident that we're being told to keep these two seemingly opposite attitudes in mind at the same time, because a lot of Christians have a very bad habit of only picking one of these two

extremes and sticking with it all the time. At one end of the spectrum, we have Christians who hear Jesus' command to not worry, that God is going to give us everything we need, and so they relax, and they get comfortable, and they assume that because God is taking care of us, we don't really need to do anything. Hey - we're God's people, we're saved by grace, and so we can just kind of float along doing whatever we want, not really paying much attention to all those times in the Bible where God calls us to lives of obedience and discipline. This kind of attitude is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace"; it's failing to recognize how much our salvation cost Jesus Christ, and living as if what Jesus accomplished for us has no bearing on our daily lives. We can put so much emphasis on what God is doing, on what Jesus has done for us, that we completely forget that we have a part to play in God's story of salvation – we are meant respond to what God has done for us by acting in the world as his representatives, Christ's body in the world. And on the other extreme, we have Christians who hear Jesus' command to be ready, to diligently await the master's return, and they think that it's all up to us, that we need to get the entire world figured out and fixed through our own power before God will accept us, that it is our activity and ability, our own goodness that will save us from sin and death, that God left us here to clean up the world and we had better get it done before he comes back. We can put so much emphasis on what we are doing that we completely forget how God has already done so much for

us, that our ability to do anything good is only possible thanks to His initiating Love. Now, all of us as individual Christians, and all churches and denominations, we all tend to lean in one of these two directions in our own faith. Presbyterians traditionally have put such a strong emphasis on God's sovereignty, on what God's grace and love have already accomplished in the world, that at times we've almost removed human agency from the equation entirely, almost to the point where we're all just puppets and God is moving us around like pawns on a chess board, and we have no say at all in what happens to the world around us and to ourselves. And there are other churches and denominations that have put such a strong emphasis on what we as humans are called to do in the world that at times the church can become only an engine for social change and cultural transformation and we forget that we are serving a God who is actively engaged in shaping the world, that God is the one who is working in our world to bring the kingdom here. Neither of these extremes gives you a complete picture of the true nature of the Christian faith, and that's the reason Jesus gives us these two seemingly incompatible commands right next to each other – becoming part of the Kingdom of God requires both God's initiating, gracious action, freely given, completely undeserved AND it requires human response, devout, courageous discipleship, a commitment to follow and obey. Here in the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his followers to Strive for the kingdom of God – and in the very next sentence, he tells

them that God is pleased to Give them that kingdom – the kingdom of God is both something that we are freely given and also something we need to strive for. We see that same tension in our reading from Philippians, where Paul tells his readers to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” As Christians, following Christ requires effort and commitment, it requires our own conscious choice to act in the world on God’s behalf, but while we are doing that in our own inadequate kind of way, at the same time God is working in us, and God’s work is so much more powerful than our work. Through God’s work, our work becomes possible – because Christ starts working in us, we are able to do the things he calls us to do, we are able to want to do the things he calls us to do. The result of this is that the lines between God’s work and our work become increasingly blurred the longer you look at it – it becomes impossible to point at individual parts of our life and say “God did that, but I did that,” because every good thing we have done we could only do because God was working in and through us. Through our striving, through our work, the Kingdom comes, but all that striving and effort is only effective because God started working in us, his power in us makes it possible for us to be transformed and for us to transform the world around us.

Now, you might be hearing all this, and thinking, well, that’s great, but if you have to work for it, then it really isn’t a gift, is it? All this talk

of striving for the kingdom, working out your salvation, it still doesn't seem to mesh with the core truth of the gospel that God's grace is free, it is undeserved, that nothing we can do or say could ever earn our way into God's favour, that nothing we could ever do or say could make us deserve what Jesus did for us on the cross. If the kingdom is a gift, if Jesus says that God is pleased to give us the kingdom, then why do we need to seek it to strive for it, to work for it?

Well, the thing about giving someone a gift is that, if you're giving it out of love, if you're giving it because you think that person will need that gift or enjoy that gift, then you really want them to actually use that gift. If you give someone a gift, you don't want them to just leave it in the box and put it off to the side and forget it. You want them to take it out and use it – if it's clothing, you want them to try it on and wear it – if it's a game, you want them to play it. And if it's something big, really costly and impressive, well, you want them to drop everything, to clear their schedule and just throw themselves into the enjoyment of that gift. If I tell my family that I've got them tickets for a trip to Disneyland, I want them to get excited, get their bags packed, renew their passports, get everything ready so that they can enjoy the gift I want to give them. That's what we want when we give someone a really great gift – we want them to appreciate it and enjoy it and drop everything else in order to experience that gift.

And that is the kind of gift God is giving us when he gives us the kingdom. God is giving us the greatest gift imaginable, freedom from our sin, from death, from pain and despair, eternal life through the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is the gift that our God is giving us, and it is such an amazing, incomparable gift that when we receive it, God wants us to drop everything we're doing and enjoy it, God wants us to put that gift to use right away. All the old things that used to distract us, money, power, sex, fame, comfort, all the ordinary things that we think are so, so important, they pale in comparison against the amazing gift of being part of the kingdom of God, having the Holy Spirit at work in our life, calling our creator Father, calling Jesus our brother. And so when Jesus tells us not to worry about food or clothing or money, he's telling us not to worry because something SO MUCH BETTER is coming along – the Kingdom of God. And when he tells us to get ready, he's telling us to get rid of everything in our lives that might stand in the way of us enjoying that gift, to clear our schedules, let go of our need to control our own destiny through our own resources and wealth and instead depend entirely on the good, gracious, free gift that is coming, depend entirely on the one who is giving it. And that isn't easy. It isn't easy to let go of all the things we think are important, to stop caring about our budgets and appearances and reputations and instead throw ourselves wholeheartedly into enjoying the gift of kingdom of God. That's why we need to work at it, to strive first for the kingdom, to every

day little by little give up control of ourselves to our Lord Jesus Christ, so that when the kingdom finally comes, we will be ready, there will be nothing else on our mind, there will be no worries or fears distracting us from enjoying the great gift our Father has in store for us. And as we work, as we strive for the kingdom, as we try to get ready for the gift that our Father is pleased to bless us with, we have God's promise that the Holy Spirit is working in us so that we will desire Jesus Christ and his kingdom above all else, so that we will be able to set everything else aside and spend all of eternity enjoying being loved by our great and mighty God. That is the future our God has in store for us. So Don't Worry. Get ready. The kingdom of God is coming. Amen.