

*Be Ready for Surprise*

Luke 12:32-40

A few years ago we were visiting with our daughter and her family when they lived in Indianapolis. It was the week of Christmas break and we decided take in one of the new children's movies that came out that year. We drove to one of these huge mega movie-plexes with 20+ screens, stadium seating, some with seats that not only recline but also move and vibrate and shake you around so that you truly experienced what was happening on the screen. (It is quite an experience especially when the movie is 3-d!)

We had to wait for the previous movie to end and so we grabbed some popcorn and drinks and found a corner to wait. I couldn't help but notice that our son-in-law stood out away from the corner, where he could see both ways. Then I realized what he was doing.

As many of you may recall our son-in-law is a police officer, now with the Westbrook, Maine P.D. at that time he was with the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Dept. and what he was doing was keeping watch. Observing the movie goers, looking for anything his trained eyes might pick up on for not only was he a police officer, in that instance he was a dad with his family close by. Keep in mind this took place when the memory of the theater shooting in Colorado was still fresh in everyone's mind or at least every law enforcement officer's mind.

I suddenly found myself checking for the nearest exit and started watching people a bit more closely. Why did that lone person have a backpack? If he was carrying drinks why did he just buy one?

Stay alert. Be ready. Is it possible to be on constant alert as Jesus suggests in this passage? I don't know about you but I can't sit down in the evening to watch my favorite program without dozing off. (And I like suspense thrillers!) Say nothing about staying focused in the wee morning hours attempting a biblical devotion or time of

contemplative prayer! Perhaps this is why prayer vigils in which we sign up for an hour or so work well. We tackle can this awareness thing in shifts. Whether it is a 24 hour prayer vigil or military duty watches there are good reasons why shifts are assigned. We even have levels of alertness as in Yellow, orange, red alerts. Nobody can remain indefinitely on high alert as in code red.

Too much unrelieved attention can be counterproductive to the creative process. Mathematicians, scientists, artists, composers, authors, - even preachers – can testify that often “breakthroughs” of insight come when (or after) they have taken a break from concentrating on whatever it was that was challenging them.

I say all this to suggest that that while it seems Jesus is calling us to such unending vigilance, it seems he is asking what is humanly impossible and if so, not very helpful. As engaging the images in Luke may be, the simple fact is that neither servants awaiting the return of their banqueting master nor homeowners on guard against thieves can remain on watch 24/7

We have to put such appeals up against what Jesus also says, “Do not worry about your life,” “Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Stay alert . . . but don’t worry.

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit . . . Yet, do not be afraid, it is God’s pleasure to supply for your needs.

I think like so many things in life it comes down to the sage advice of Mr. Miyagi (The Karate Kid 1984) *"Better learn balance. Balance is key. Balance good, karate good. Everything good. Balance bad, better pack up, go home. Understand?"*

Balance! In faith, in life. There are those persons who can be so focused on their own notions of just how God is supposed to act, that they miss the Jesus right here in

their presence. Sounds a little like what Jesus warned in his parable of the farmer and his huge barns. Don't become so fixated and obsessed with things or thing, even if that is a singular religious teaching, that you miss fullness of what God is really offering you.

Last week I suggested that each of us should wrestle with what it means to be "rich toward God."

Being "rich toward God" is not primarily about putting sizable sums in the offering plates. (Although they will not be refused!) Making moth and thief resistant purses is not merely a matter of following a better business strategy than that of building bigger barns. What Jesus is seeking to instill in his followers is an orientation toward the whole of life as an abundant gift from a generous God – a gift which because of the Giver's abundance and generosity can be given away with abandon. As the children learned last week neither receiving nor sharing is possible when our hands are clenched. It is the same with our hearts and minds. Being "rich toward God" involves a generosity of spirit that opens our perceptions to the generosity of God that is always present, but often at the edges of awareness, easily overlooked when our focus becomes too obsessive.

How does this relate to the image of watching night and day?

"Being on high alert" and being "asleep at the switch" are not our only alternatives. We can focus our anticipation, our watchful waiting, in ways that are neither fixated nor fuzzy. We can cultivate a tacit awareness, a peripheral spiritual vision. There is a difference between being *the* lookout and being *on* the lookout. We can have these things, these ideas, these notions about God, about life, but we can learn to hold them lightly so when the unexpected comes we can receive something new. Dr. Eugene Lowry, preaching professor at St. Paul School of Theology, Leewood, KS. wrote, we can "position ourselves to be surprised."

Surprise is certainly what the master's servants experienced when he at last appears and turns their expectations upside down, by serving the very ones who have served him. The kingdom banquet for which we are instructed to strive (seek first the kingdom) is presented to us (as to the servants in this parable) not as compensation for a lifetime of faithfulness, but as pure gift.

So be ready for surprise!

Thinking back to the "creative people" composers, artists, mathematicians, scientists, preachers, who by taking a break, encounter a breakthrough; this does not "just happen." One must carefully nurture disciplined awareness over time. Even in those "off times" the creative mind will still be working, and the spirit can enter in often when we "are not looking."

Real mastery in any discipline comes as we offer ourselves in service to the "givens." This is in contrast to the all the times I've tried to impose my deliberate will on whatever I'm working on or I encountered. An accomplished painter put it this way: "I listen to the colors, who tell me, in good time, and in no uncertain terms, how I must proceed."

I knew an artist whose medium was large chunks of wood, often still attached to the roots in the ground, his artist tool: a chainsaw. When I asked him how he decided what he was going to carve, a bear, a fish, an eagle, he replied "I study the wood and wait for it to show me what is there."

So, yes, dress yourselves for action, have your lamps lit, batteries charged. But do not be afraid; be ready for surprise, for God desires to give you all the good things God's reign has to offer.

And after you get over the surprise use it to surprise others with the abundant free grace of a God of abundant love!