

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – August 4, 2019
“Trusting in the Promise”
Luke 12:32-40 and Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

“In the Luther Bible, the German translation of ‘kingdom’ is *Reich*.”¹ Fast-forward hundreds of years following the Protestant Reformation, and that same word, *Reich*, takes on a far more sinister tone among the German people. As a result of the national elections of 1933, the Nazis, otherwise known as the *Third Reich*, took over “all the structures of the German state, including the federation of Protestant churches of Germany.” The so-called German Christians attempted to make the church subservient to the Nazi state and “to an alarming degree also corrupted its doctrine.”²

“They preached and taught another gospel, declaring the identity of the nation and the people with the supreme good, especially as they were embodied in their Führer.” Such striking idolatry did not go unnoticed, and resulted in the creation of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, penned in 1934 by a group of German pastors and scholars. Their words have since been adopted into the *Book of Confessions* of our own Presbyterian Church.³

¹Stephen Farris, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 3*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), Ed. Joel B. Green, 231.

² Farris, 231.

³ Farris, 231.

The Declaration reads, in part, “let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God, in order that God’s people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said: ‘I will never leave you, nor forsake you.’ Therefore, ‘Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’”⁴

In our first lesson this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that he comes like a thief in the night. This alone should be enough to lay to rest the occasional speculation regarding the specifics of his return. And yet, while we know not the day nor the hour, a few of his followers, those filled with anxiety over uncertainty, continue to suggest a certain date in history when Christ will come again. In the end, all such speculation is useless. And the only appropriate response is that we might be found in a state of perpetual preparedness, which is just another way of saying that we ought to pursue the path of virtue.⁵

When Christ calls himself the Son of Man and claims that he is coming like a thief in the night, our first response may well be one of fear and foreboding. But, as

⁴ *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 247-248.

⁵ Farris, 232.

we wrestle further with this image, we recognize that our Lord has no intention of raiding our homes, as this simile seems to suggest. For while he enters our lives unexpectedly, like a thief, he does so in the form of a servant.

Therefore, our preparedness is not a matter of fortifying our lives from the clutches of a wrathful God, as if we were trying to keep a criminal out. No. Our preparedness is about welcoming the arrival of the beloved kingdom. We do this by removing barriers to his arrival and assuming the role of the *maitre d'* of a fine restaurant who says, “Right this way; the table’s waiting.”⁶ Then, having ordered our lives with virtuous preparation, we pray that he will not be disappointed.

Surely, we Christians are people of faith. We embody what the author of Hebrews describes as “the settled conviction that the unseen God is real, and that while God remains hidden from our sight and our touch, this God continues to uphold this world and to commune with God’s people.”⁷ Yet, even though our convictions may be settled, they are not formed without hardship.

⁶ Farris, 232.

⁷ Joshua W. Jipp, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 3*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), Ed. Joel B. Green, 227.

We recognize, for example, “that God’s promises and existence do not always seem believable.” That “all who trust in God experience seasons of doubt.” That “all believers will... question either the reality of God or the presence of God in the world.” And that “we may question and doubt the reality of God in times of apathy, in seasons of suffering, and in moments when the presence of evil and pain in our world” threaten to overwhelm us. ⁸

To have faith, then, is not to believe “that God is going to reward God’s people with worldly status, economic and material prosperity, or freedom from hardship and suffering.” Instead, “those who live by faith are those who let their future determine their present.” ⁹ The faithful anticipate Jesus’ promised return, confident that he comes not to plunder, but to serve.

And as this knowledge seeps into our very being, we begin to see both the future and the present in a new light. Called to follow Jesus yesterday, and today, and tomorrow, we set about the task of re-ordering our lives in faithfulness by leaning into the example of Christ’s compassion and his timeless message of love. This is our virtuous preparation.

⁸ Jipp, 227.

⁹ Scot McKnight, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 3*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), Ed. Joel B. Green, 226.

Friends, I invite you now to think of someone who embodies the Christian virtue of preparation in their life of faith. I ask you to take about a minute of silence to do this. I imagine that you have set your minds on some very powerful witnesses. People whose faithfulness derives from an experienced trust in God as a keeper of promises.¹⁰ The lives of such people exude a living hope, rooted in the past and present, yes, but also forever directed toward the future.¹¹

We call these faithful the saints of God, recognizing that some of them are those who have long been held in high esteem, catalogued for us in the pages of scripture. While others, those whose faith is no less sincere, carry on with “the quiet disposition of an elderly grandparent who... cares for a dying spouse, who generously gives away resources for the good of others, and who quietly volunteers to serve church and community with little recognition.”¹²

I invite you to recall once again the person that you imagined during our moments of silent reflection. Such a person understands that God will preserve a

¹⁰ Fred B. Craddock, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Hebrews* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 136.

¹¹ Jipp, 228.

¹² Jipp, 228.

future for us. And through a lifetime of selfless service, he or she makes God's purposes known. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.