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Introduction

It is often when we perceive our security as threatened that conflict begins to brew. This is particularly true when we operate under a notion of scarcity, and what we accumulate seems under constant threat of being taken from us. Then, even building barns is not enough; we go on to build walls around our barns, and make sure they are under armed surveillance. Fear thus gives shape to our posture of encounter. Our vigilance and defences heighten, and we grow suspicious of the knock at our door. We brace ourselves for God knows what.

In this week's text, Jesus challenges his followers to radically shift their notions of security. It interests me that in this week's lectionary text, Jesus likens his second coming to "a thief in the night." This is not a delightful, unexpected run-in with an old friend at the local corner shop. It is an intrusion upon our structures of security. It involves risk. It involves loss. It involves fear. It is the coming of God's kingdom. How are we supposed to prepare for such an encounter?

Text

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 unfailing 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. 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. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 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. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Comment

In February 2019, the president of my country, the United States of America, declared a national emergency at the US-Mexico border. Such designation would allow a redirection of funding from the National Defense Department to the building of a border wall that would impede the growing number of migrants seeking entry into America. As of May 2019, 19,000 of these migrants wait in border

cities to seek asylum at ports of entry, fleeing violent conflict in their homeland. The cost of building a physical wall is estimated to total nearly \$60 billion. The environmental cost is inestimable and includes an increase in flooding and the compromise of the habitats of over 50 endangered species. The psychological cost is sobering, witnessed in the re-traumatizing of migrants as families are separated at the border, held in detention centres, and living in the fear of deportation. When I read this week's lectionary text, I am reminded that my country allocates fifty-two percent of its discretionary spending budget to national defence, and wonder what message this sends about the location and posture of the American heart.

This week's text places us in the midst of the "travel narrative" of Luke (9:51-19:27), as a growing caravan of followers walk alongside Jesus and learn from his teachings about discipleship on his way to Jerusalem. We enter a lesson chock-full of instruction for preparation:

Sell your possessions...

Give alms...

Make purses...

Be alert...

Be ready...

Be dressed for action...

The Revised Standard Version translates the last in this list as "let your loins be girded," a phrase appearing in other biblical passages as characters prepare to engage in confrontation. The long tunics donned at the time would have created a cumbersome obstacle for the quick, agile movements necessary in fighting or flight. A quick search online offers graphics of this choreography of garments. The act of girding involved first rolling up one's tunic, then weaving it through the legs, and finally either tucking the ends into a belt or tying them into a secure knot. Girding reduced the risk of tripping over one's garments, and allowed for greater mobility in work, travel, or battle.

The instruction to gird actually appears twice in the text. The master's slaves, who have vigilantly awaited their master's return from the wedding banquet, see him "fastening his belt" in preparation of serving *them* a meal. Turning to the original Greek of this passage reveals that the word chosen to describe the master's preparation for an encounter of service, *perizonnyimi*, is the same used to instruct Jesus's followers in how to prepare for his second coming. Not only is Jesus modeling a reversal of power in this illustration, but a complete reconfiguration of this well-known act of preparation. To gird ourselves for Jesus's coming is to free ourselves for service, removing whatever might trip us up.

Often, what trips us up most is fear. Again, I find it curious how Jesus describes his second coming. A thief in the night evokes responses of fear, and we have reason to believe Jesus may very well rob us of the false securities we cling to. The disciples are gradually becoming aware that there is risk involved in following Jesus; risk in the kingdom of God becoming realised on earth. As we see throughout the gospels, to encounter Jesus is to be met with a complete upheaval of life as we know it, of

economics as we understand it, and of power differentials that we have come to take as a given.

From the very first verse, we hear from Jesus that we are not to fear. In fact, the proclamation “fear not!” appears throughout the Lukan gospel. They are the words spoken to Zechariah preceding the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:13), to Mary preceding the birth of Christ (1:30), to the shepherds in the field announcing Jesus’s birth (2:10), at the calling of Simon Peter to discipleship (5:10), at the death of Jairus’s daughter (8:50), and in Jesus’s teachings of discipleship (12:7). Each of these moments brings new life. Each recognizes the fear of the unknown. Each is a preparation for an encounter with the holy.

Biblical scholar Karoline Lewis observes that “when the lack of fear precedes our fear-driven desires for possessions, purchases, and procurements we might actually be able to imagine treasures beyond self-driven determination, self-assessed success, and self-obsessed security.” Our posture of defence collapses into one of service.

Jesus provides another curious method of preparation which comes in his instruction to “make purses for yourselves that do not wear out” (Luke 12:33). There are echoes in today’s text of the disciples’ commissioning at the onset of their journey together (Luke 10:4). The disciples are to embark on their ministry of healing and preaching without bread, an extra tunic, money, or a purse (Luke 9:3). Absent of a purse, there is not even the means to carry possessions that would offer security on the journey. Their ministry is thus fully reliant on God and the hospitality of strangers. They cannot afford to put up walls between self and other, and their hearts follow suit.

In this passage, Jesus assures us that the treasure of God’s kingdom is not locked away, shoved in the back of a closet and slowly deteriorating; it is accessible and among us in the exchange of generosity and nourishment, particularly with those at the margins whom Jesus girded himself to serve. This is not the kingdom determined by the powers and principalities of our world, who fuel anxiety and invest billions in support of defensive posturing. This kingdom is one in which we equip ourselves for encounters of service. This is a kingdom not contained within money bags or walls, not controlled by fear-driven desires for possessions and the false security they offer. This is a kingdom held by the ongoing work of stitching together communities that in themselves hold values of solidarity, trust, mercy, and love that is a risk worth taking.

Response

The Loving Kindness Meditation provides an opportunity to shift our inward posture toward self and others prior to the encounters we might anticipate with fear, anxiety, and suspicion. What might it look like to pray for safety, health, ease, and happiness to fill these conflicted spaces, whether at work, in our families, in our churches, and in our civic and political engagement?

May I be free from inner and outer harm and danger. May I be safe and protected.

May I be free of mental suffering or distress.

May I be happy.

May I be free of physical pain and suffering.

May I be healthy and strong.

May I be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully, with ease.

You can find the full meditation here: <https://www.mindful.org/a-loving-kindness-meditation-to-boost-compassion/>

Prayer

We hear you knocking, O God.
Soften our defences
Free us from false securities
Empty us of treasures that do not last
Fill us with expectation of nourishment
Send us messengers to lessen our fear.

May our encounter with you disarm us
So we might open our arms wider for loving embrace.

Amen