

Sermon for Sunday, August 11, 2013 Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16, Luke 12:32-40 "People Get Ready"

Forty years ago this month, the great Curtis Mayfield, an R&B singer from the 50s and 60s, was at the March on Washington. He heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. He heard the voices of thousands singing "We Shall Overcome." Inspired, he wrote a song, one that became something of an anthem for the Civil Rights movement. Some of you may recall it:

"People get ready there's a train a-comin', you don't need no baggage, you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'. Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord."

People get ready. It's coming. Pay attention. You don't need to carry anything with you. You don't need anything but faith.

Could there be a more apt anthem for us today?

If we wanted to find a song that most perfectly expressed what we heard this morning in the Epistle and the Gospel, that passage from Hebrews where Paul teaches what faith looks like and the story from Luke where Jesus says "prepare yourselves," we could not find a more apt song than "People Get Ready." It links together the necessity for reordering our priorities and for trusting, in having faith, in the midst of tumult.

In times of great change, there are moments when critically important messages are delivered, and often those who hear them don't understand the full import of them just then. But there's a feeling that we have that this is something we need to pay attention to, to take them into our hearts. We need to trust the words. If we have faith, as Paul says, we trust in "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

I suspect that many who listened to Dr. King in August 1963 had no idea the power that his "I Have a Dream" oration would have, and continues to have, to this day, a speech that reminds us of Abraham's faith just as St Paul reminds us of it in the passage from Hebrews. Dr. King died before the work of equality for all regardless of skin color could be completed, but he had faith that it would come eventually. Abraham died before the Israelites made it all the way to the promised land but he had faith that his people would get there. And we know that Jesus died before the world truly understood the gift he gave us. We could even say that the world still does not understand that gift.

"People get ready for the train to Jordan , It's picking up passengers from coast to coast, Faith is the key, open the doors and board 'em, There's hope for all among those loved the most."

Jesus says that there is change coming, change in the way we relate to our Creator. We are to drop all the baggage of our former understanding. We are supposed to make new purses, not to hold our money – Jesus says that's one of the things that get in our way – but virtual purses to hold our transformed hearts. The old ways and values are replaced with ones that hold love as the most important virtue – love of God, love of our neighbor without exception. When Jesus talks about this, he gives a little mini –parable about a master who comes home at an unexpected hour, and his servants are ready to do whatever he asks. They are prepared. The master is so pleased that he has them sit down for a meal with him – he serves them!

Jesus is saying that the servants have their priorities straight. They are ready to do their jobs, whenever necessary. They are aware that the master can come at any time and everything is prepared. No one is off playing a video game on the computer. No one is away sleeping off too much wine. They're ready.

Part of the reason that they are ready is because they have faith that at some point the master will return, and because they love and respect the master, they want to be ready for him. They don't know the hour, but they know that he will return. When Jesus tells this story, he is, in fact, talking about his own return at the end of days, whenever it might come, and he wants those who listen to know that if they believe in him – if they have faith in him – they will be ready, and they will be blessed because of it.

Readiness is one of those things we sometimes worry about, isn't it? We've gotten our guidance about our things we should have in case a hurricane comes – water, canned food, medicines, batteries and radios and such. And every time there's a hint of a snowstorm in the winter, the shelves of the grocery store are bare of milk and bread and toilet paper – such an odd collection of things people worry about running out of!

But there are other worries about readiness that take less benign turns. I am sure each of us knows someone who saves all sorts of things of dubious value "because I might need it someday." It may be magazines or newspapers – everyone of a certain age has piles of old National Geographics stuck somewhere in a corner, because you might want to refer to that article about polar bears someday – or it might be canned goods or it might be rubber bands or string or nails or even clothes. Ah, clothes! I have size 8 clothes, and I have size ten clothes, and then I've got the clothes I can actually fit into. The odds that I will ever fit back into the size 8s are very slim indeed (a bad pun, I know), but I hang on to them. They are part of the baggage that Jesus says to let go of. I'm expending all this energy keeping stuff that I am not using, because I might need it some day if a miracle occurs and I'm back into a size 8. Of course, by that time, they would be out of style, but a girl can hope!

Those of us who hang on to stuff out of worry need to listen to Jesus and to Paul.

First of all, getting ready for Jesus isn't like making up your hurricane emergency kit. It's more like spring housecleaning. If you had the whole family coming to your house for Easter, you'd probably do a good spring housecleaning and get rid of all the old stuff (or at least pack it away) and prepare for the family's arrival. You have faith that you will have what you need for their visit. You've done your preparation work. So all that is left is to be ready to hear their tires on the gravel in the driveway, so you can greet them with joy, just like the servants in the parable. What if you decided you'd do a spiritual housecleaning to be ready for Jesus? What would you want to get rid of? Old fears about whether you need lots of stuff to make you feel secure or good? Old prejudices about "who is my neighbor?" Old beliefs that say that Jesus would never find you loveable or worthy?

And what would you want to hold on to, since "where your treasure is, there your heart is also?"

Faith that Jesus loves you. Faith that we can change the world, a bit at a time. Faith that we don't really need stuff to feel better. Faith that we may not completely understand some of the good things happening in our world, but that we can see Our Lord in it. Faith that we may not see the change we hope for in the darker things happening in our world, but that Our Lord walks with us and encourages us to help change things.

People get ready. There's a train a-comin'. You don't need no baggage, you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'. Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord."

Amen.