

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
August 7, 2022
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Hold Fast, Little Flock

In the early 1990s I lived and taught in rural East Tennessee. And as I traveled to and from the different centers associated with the community college where I was teaching I would see all these signs, pretty often. They were about 2 feet wide and about 6 inches or so high; they were painted white with blue letters that said, "Jesus is coming R U ready" (no punctuation mark). "Jesus is coming R U ready."

In more recent years, in various states, possibly including this one, I have seen bumper stickers that read, "Jesus is coming! Look busy!" Have you seen those?

Both those signs and those bumper stickers draw their inspiration in part from today's gospel and a particular understanding that Jesus is coming again.

The Church has affirmed the return of Christ from the very beginning. As soon as the resurrected Christ disappears from sight on a hillside near the village of Bethany, heavenly messengers declare to the amazed apostles, "This same Jesus will come again."

We affirm the return of Christ at each Eucharist: in the creed, and, in addition to the creed, in a few minutes, as part of the Eucharistic prayer, we will together proclaim what we call "the mystery of faith": *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.*

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Our gospel companion this year, in Year C of our three-year lectionary, is the gospel of Luke. Luke was himself a companion of Paul, our patron. And Luke's gospel is the first part of a two-volume work: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke's gospel was most likely composed in the mid-80s of the first century, so think around the year 85, about 50 years or so after Jesus' earthly lifetime. The location of the writing, most likely, was the great city of Antioch on the Orontes River in what is now Turkey.

Antioch was among the most beautiful and important cities built by the Greek

Empire. And you may recall that in Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 11, verse 26 tells us that these Jesus followers were first called "Christians" in Antioch. It wasn't a name intended as a compliment at the beginning, but they took it up and ran with it.

Writing from Antioch, then, Luke's gospel was created not just for a single community as Matthew's gospel and Mark's gospel were but for multiple communities of Christians throughout the Mediterranean region. At the start, the Jesus movement was a movement *within* Judaism. The first Jesus followers, like Jesus himself, were Jews. These followers of the Way, as they called it, affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah and that he had come for all people, not only the Jewish people.

After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the year 70, however, Judaism underwent some big changes. One of these was that Jews who affirmed the Messiah had already come were no longer welcome in the synagogues and in other centers of Jewish life and religion. This is a lonely place to be. It's hard to be thrown out by your family when they can't accept who you are or whom you have become. It hurts. Many of these followers of Jesus were sad about it; some were bitter, and their bitterness turned into zealotry on behalf of the Jesus movement and not always in a good way.

These Jesus followers, no longer considered Jews by other Jews, migrated all over the Mediterranean region. And in doing so, they faced another source of opposition: the Roman Empire. In living by the principles taught by Jesus, they found themselves in tension with the hierarchy and equality-smashing machinery of the Romans who were happy enough just to do away with them rather than deal with unrest they might stir up.

This is the context in which Luke's gospel is written. Scholar and author Alexander John Shaia highlights these realities and tensions in his work, noting that the style and content of Luke are a kind of how-to manual with many practical teachings and instructions for these Christians dealing with the hurt of losing their families and with the heavy hand of Rome.

One of the literary motifs in Luke is that most of this gospel takes place on the road as Jesus and his followers travel from one place to another. Things happen when they get to the next place, and things happen along the way.

For these Mediterranean communities of Jewish Jesus followers who at the time called themselves the people of the Way, the road metaphor is quite apt. How could

these people of the Way find their way through the midst of these numerous challenges? What was the way through? Dr Shaia suggests that the principle driving question, the crucial concern for the communities to whom Luke was addressed and to us, two thousand years later, seeking to walk still in the way of Jesus is this: *How can we mature in service?* How can we grow up into the full image of Christ?

This is our ongoing question today. We are not hoping to mature in service as we follow Jesus yippy-skippy through days of ease. We are seeking to live out the teachings of Jesus, even and perhaps most especially when they appear most counter-cultural, and to do this with wisdom and courage and genuineness, including genuine love and care.

In this sense, both for those original readers and for us, the invitation of Luke is to go to new-to-us places and to keep walking the walk.

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The Church has affirmed the return of Christ from its very beginning.

And the communities to whom the gospel of Luke was first addressed, like all other Christians in the first century, including our patron St Paul, thought that Christ's return was imminent: "It's gonna happen any minute."

But fifty years after Jesus' earthly life, they were still waiting. They were getting kinda ancey. Most of us can hold steady for a while. Sometimes we can endure a lot, put up with a lot, when we know that it is for a relatively short time.

But when the short time turns out to be not so short, we can easily begin to get tired and to lose heart.

And that's the situation to which our gospel reading today is addressed.

There aren't that many Christians at the time of Luke's writing. They are scattered in smallish communities around the Mediterranean region. They are little flocks. And they are dispersed, in little pockets in many places.

Today's gospel is a word of support and comfort: Hold fast. Don't despair. Don't give up. God wants you to have the all the riches of God's grace and goodness, a grace so incomprehensible that the ruler, the king, of this kingdom, will gird up his garments and serve his servants at a banquet.

This week's passage picks up on last week's theme of possessions. The message is, *sell your possessions and give alms*. Perhaps for us we can understand this as let go of everything that no longer serves and convert it into something that someone else needs and may be able to use. The best investments, the passage instructs, are investments that will pay dividends forever, not just for now.

Then the passage turns to a list of injunctions about remaining ready, about being dressed for action with your lamps lit, not being surprised when the master returns, and so on.

This particular part of this passage has often been interpreted poorly, but the return of Christ, which the Church has affirmed since its beginning, is a promise, not a threat!

We don't have to "look busy" because Jesus is coming. We are not being asked to run around willy-nilly, "do something, don't just stand there."

Rather, we're being asked to be prepared and always preparing. But how?

We know that it is impossible to remain on high-alert status long term. We can try, but it doesn't work. We are human, and we live in mortal bodies. We get tired and hungry and "hangry." We get distracted.

Another way to understand this passage is as a call to train consistently, to observe disciplines that serve us as we seek to serve God and others. This is connected to that crucial question underlying all of Luke: *How can we mature in service?*

Active-duty folks might express it as, "PT every day." Does that make sense? Exercise every day. There is wisdom in engaging regularly, even daily, in practices that support our health and wellbeing, physically, yes, but also spiritually, mentally, emotionally, communally.

And some days it may seem like we are not making headway at all. It may feel or seem as though we are doing our best to do all the right things, and we are just standing still. But holding steady isn't necessarily bad.

James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, expresses it this way:

"Keeping [a good] habit alive is a powerful act. It's easier to stay in shape than to get in shape. It's easier to keep a house clean than to get it clean."

Many days it may feel like you are treading water, but maintaining your progress saves your future self a great deal of work.”

Hold steady. Keep doing the indicated things.

The writer to the Hebrews expresses a similar point: we are not alone in doing our best and not always seeing all the results we might like. Generations upon generations of people attempting to live in God’s ways have spent their entire sojourns upon earth acting upon promises that they themselves never saw entirely fulfilled.

And so, this word is for us today. Little flock, hold steady. Keep training every day. Keep increasing capacity to love and serve like Jesus. Together we will continue to mature in service, to find our part and our partners in serving this Key West community. We will hold fast to what is good. And we will continue to affirm, as the Church has from its beginning, this promise: Christ will come again.