

Peripheral Vision – Luke 12:32-40 – August 7, 2016

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Back when I was a music composition major in college, I can remember a number of times when I would be hunkered down in a practice room in the music building. Sitting at a piano, blank score in front of me, and trying to come up with something...anything creative, some little theme of music that could turn into something more. I would improvise a bit on the piano keyboard or grab my flute, hoping to come up with workable melody. Many times I came up empty.

The focus of my attention was on being creative, trying to force something to come. Hours were spent in this pursuit of musical creativity, seeking just the right combination of notes. All my energy would be directed toward this end, yet surprisingly those were the times I was least creative.

Ideas would come in the strangest moments. Sitting in music literature class, listening to the classic composers, a series of notes might stir my imagination. Or listening to a fellow music major practicing in another room, an idea would come. Or maybe while sitting up at Eagle Lake on campus, taking in the beauty of the scene. Or while hanging out and relaxing with friends at the Baptist Student Union. Sometimes ideas would come to me at night as I dreamed. Or even during my morning shower.

My goal as a music composition major was to write decent music. And I found that some of my best ideas came when I least expected it. When my focus was elsewhere, when my mind wasn't forced to stare at a blank page. When I concentrated too much on trying to be creative, I became anxious and my mind actually shut down. Sometimes being overly focused was a detriment to achieving my goal.

Others have had similar experiences. Researchers trying to solve a particularly difficult problem. Artists trying to put paint onto a fresh canvas. Writers looking for just the right words for their story. Engineers wanting to develop the perfect plan. Doctors coming up with a diagnosis. Sometimes it can even happen to any of us in our own homes. You've lost something. You concentrate, trying to retrace your steps, hoping to find the missing item. You wrack your brain on the problem, but for some reason, you just can't remember where you put it. You finally give up, move on to something else, sit down to read a book or watch a little television, and suddenly you know where the lost item is. The thought seems to just appear in your mind. When your focus turns to something different, suddenly the problem is solved. Sometimes too much focus can be a bad thing.

With that in mind, I'd like to take a look at the parable that Jesus shared with his disciples from Luke's gospel. In this particular passage, Jesus is comforting his followers. He tells them not to be afraid, because their Father in heaven wants to welcome them into the realm of God. God's cares very much for them, like a shepherd cares for his flock of sheep.

And then Jesus tells them a parable about waiting for God. It is a parable about readiness, about being prepared for when God comes, for when the Son of Man, Jesus, returns.

When Jesus comes for his followers, he wants them to be dressed and ready to go. To be ready for action at a moment's notice. He uses the image of a wedding banquet. When the groom comes home, the servants should be ready and waiting. Their lamps lit, dressed in their daytime clothes no matter how late the hour. They should be alert for his knock at the door, prepared to open it as soon as he arrives. Those who are suitably prepared and alert to his arrival will be truly blessed. The groom will come in, pleased by his servants' preparation, and then - he will take on the role of a servant. He will ask them to sit down, and he will prepare and serve a meal for them. They will find blessing.

Jesus also uses a second image – that of a homeowner being prepared for a thief. The homeowner doesn't know when the thief will strike. If he isn't prepared, he won't be able to stop the thief. Just as a thief is unexpected, so too will the arrival of the Son of Man be unexpected.

So what does this parable mean for us? It is a call for vigilance – a call for us to pay attention. It is an exhortation for us to remain alert and to be prepared for the coming of God's realm. To be focused on being ready to receive God when God arrives. Okay – so what does **that** mean? What does it mean to be ready?

Are we supposed to stand around, Bible in hand, singing hymns and waiting for Jesus to come walking through our door at any moment? Do we put aside everything else in our lives and fixate on his coming to us? Do we neglect all other parts our lives so that we might prepare ourselves for his arrival into our midst?

It sort of sounds that way, doesn't it? Jesus gave us the image of the servants waiting for the bridegroom after he returns from the banquet. The image shows them all staying up way past bedtime, forgetting their other responsibilities, and sitting by the door, lamps lit, waiting with baited breath for him to come strolling through the door. Then there's the example of the homeowner – how can he really be prepared to catch a thief? Does Jesus mean that he needs to stay home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, just in case a thief decides to show up at some random time?

So what does Jesus mean? How do we remain vigilant like he wants us to, but without neglecting everything else?

And this takes us to what I was getting at earlier. When we focus too much on one thing, we become ineffective. If our goal is to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, do we sit here in this church building, barricaded behind the walls, and just wait for Jesus to come? No. That doesn't make much sense to us, if we think about all the other things that Jesus has told us to go out and do. We will become ineffective followers if we stand around in a heightened state of readiness. If our eyes are focused on just one goal, then we won't see everything else going on around us. We will miss out on much of God's realm that is present right here among us.

So alternately, does this mean we just go about our lives as usual and not really worry at all when Jesus will come? That doesn't sound right either, not based on this parable.

I think this is the key. When I told you about my moments of inspiration coming when I least expected them rather than when I shut myself up in a practice room in the music building, there was one important detail I left out. Yes, those inspirational moments came to me when my focus was elsewhere. But they came to me because I was prepared to receive them.

As a music major, I spent much of my time in preparation. I took music theory classes so I could understand the basic building blocks of music. I studied Music History and Literature so I could learn about and study all the great masterpieces of music and their composers. I took private lessons on my flute so I could become a better performer. I played in band and sang in choir so I could understand how different lines of music and musicians worked together for one common purpose. I taught students to play flute and to conduct, sharing my knowledge with the next generation of musicians. I performed for others, so that my enjoyment of music wasn't just a self-centered occupation, but a joy to be shared with the world.

Because of my preparation, by doing all those other things related to music, I was ready to receive those unexpected and delightful moments of inspiration when they finally arrived.

The same is true for us as followers of Jesus Christ. Our preparedness is not about vigilance for the sake of vigilance. We are vigilant when we chose to follow Christ as our way of life. To be ready to receive God's realm, we must live as if God's realm were already here.

God comes to us in so many different and unexpected ways, if we are prepared for them, we will know them when they come. How do we prepare? By living a life of expectation. By being constantly ready to receive the blessings when they come. By focusing less on the worldly stuff of life, and being open to God in those unexpected moments. By reading the Bible consistently, knowing the stories, engaging in study on our own and with others, practicing a life of prayer and devotion, by participating in regular worship and by giving of our resources. By living out our calling to service in loving our neighbors – caring for those in need, making friends outside of our normal circles, standing up for those who experience injustice instead of walking away, and giving our material goods to those who do without. Our preparation - those choices we make for how we live our daily lives - those things will dictate whether or not we are ready to receive the blessings of God when they come to us. We will recognize the blessing because we will know what to look for.

When we live our daily lives in anticipation of God's realm, we will see God at work in a variety places and times. And when we consistently live our lives according to Christ's commands, when loving God and loving neighbor become our way of life, we will be ready for God's arrival, and we will see God's blessings all around us.