

Nadia Stefko
31 July 2016
Proper 13, year C
Luke 12:13-21

“[And] God said to him, ‘you fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.’ “

It sort of sounds like a death threat, doesn't it??

Today's gospel passage is from that highly-charged middle section of Luke's gospel that we've been reading through for a few weeks now; Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, and as he gets closer to the city, his message and his stories get even more pointed. There's a sense of urgency in his tone as he conveys to his followers his “Kingdom Vision.”

In today's parable, God's voice almost seems to be taunting the wealthy land owner: “You fool!”, God says, “This very night your life is being demanded of you.”

In *this* story, whether we read it as divine punishment, or just an untimely passing, it seems clear that the main character is facing his actual, physical death. If we were to leave the camera trained on this scene, we'd soon be talking about funeral arrangements, and the family inheritance.

But the thing is, this parable is not the first time in the gospels we see God demanding a man's life of him in an unlikely and untimely way. This fellow with the big barns *is not the first one* to whom God says, “today your life is being demanded of you.”

* * *

Back at the beginning of the gospels, Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee. He sees the fishermen James and John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. The gospel of Mark tells us, “Immediately [Jesus] called them; and they left their father in the boat with the hired men, and [they] followed him.”

James, John and their father Zebedee--all of their lives were changed in an instant, all because of a call from God; It was an encounter where their lives were being demanded of them that very day.

The story of James the Apostle has been on my mind this week because on Monday we celebrated his feast day in the church calendar.

James and his brother answered the call--they left behind family, and a stable, lucrative profession, because Jesus entered in and laid claim to their lives.

What we know about James and John from scripture isn't all flattering:

Like the other disciples, they were flawed men--Seeming to get it wrong about as often as they got it right. They were quick-tempered, earning the nickname, "sons of thunder."

We see them quibbling about who is the greatest,

And who would get to sit next to Jesus in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And yet, they were undeniably some of Jesus' closest friends.

Along with Peter, they comprised an inner circle within the twelve--

They were the ones Jesus took to the mountaintop for the Transfiguration,

And to the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his death.

According to tradition, after the ascension, James carried the gospel west to the region that is now Spain. And when he returned to Jerusalem, he was the first of the 12 apostles to be martyred for his affiliation with Jesus.

The book of Acts tells us simply that King Herod Agrippa had him "killed with the sword."

We don't have a detailed account of how it all went down; but I imagine James looking his executioner in the eye and saying something like: **"Do what you need to do. My life has already been demanded of me once...and it was the best thing that ever happened to me."**

James didn't need to fear Herod's sword, because by following Jesus, he had come to see his life as part of a much bigger story. To borrow a phrase from today's parable, He was living a life "rich toward God."

Far from storing up treasures for himself, James had embraced a life where **his greatest treasure was what he could give away to others.** His greatest accomplishment was to build up the community of faith by sharing the Good News far and wide.

In this way, James was quite the foil to the main character in today's gospel story...

* * *

In the parable Jesus tells, God calls the barn owner “a fool”,
And so when WE hear this story, we’re inclined to regard him with a certain disdain.

But to be honest with you, I just don’t think the guy was that bad.
In fact, I find him to be a pretty sympathetic character in a few ways.
He was comfortable. He had a sense of security.
We have no indication that his behavior was hostile or disrespectful of his neighbors.

He ate and drank out of his own abundance. *He was a burden to no one.*
He lived a life of self-sufficiency.

In a way, what he did with his barns makes sense.
In a way, it was good stewardship of his resources.
He had a bumper crop and he needed somewhere to store it,
So it didn’t go to waste--so it didn’t flood the market.

Bigger barns would assure there would be food if next year’s crop underproduced.

In a world where the ultimate goal is self-sufficiency, this man played his cards just right.

...But did you notice how **he lacked a community?**

When he didn’t know what to do about his barns...
The only person he asked for advice was *himself*.
When he achieved his goals, and it was time to celebrate,
He ate and drank and made merry...*with himself*.

It sounds lonely, doesn’t it?

Jesus calls it *foolish*...God calls him a *fool*!

But I don’t think that what Jesus is critiquing is this guy’s commitment to protect the food supply; what I think he’s calling foolish is the man’s desire--his *insistence*--on going it alone.

This land-owner had made **an idol out of self-sufficiency**.
He was only in it for himself, and so, when he came face-to-face with God’s injunction that “tonight your life is being demanded of you,” **it was the ultimate blow to the fiercely independent status he had worked so hard to achieve...for himself.**

God's claim on the land-owners life that night was nothing short of devastating;
Because all he had built in life he built for himself,
And so when he died, it all died with him.

It's tragic. And it's all a stark contrast to James and the other apostles who Jesus called out of their fishing boats and taught to live lives "rich toward God".

* * *

Today at the 9:30 service,
We will baptize Sawyer L--- C----- into the household of God.

It's a great day for a baptism, because the sacrament is a sort of theological antidote to the kind of self-sufficiency our barn builder in today's gospel was trying to achieve.

In baptism, and in our weekly sharing of the Eucharist,
We en-act our deep conviction that God never intended for us to go it alone in this life.

In baptism, God claims us as God's own beloved children. *God demands our very lives of us...*
And in doing so...we are incorporated into something much, much bigger than ourselves:
We are re-born into the living, breathing Body of Christ in the world...
And our lives are never the same for it.

Baptism is just the beginning of a **lifelong journey** of discipleship--
Of learning from Jesus and one another how to live in the household of God;
How to shape our actions and our aspirations NOT for our-selves alone.

And if little Sawyer ever forgets it--*which, by the way, she will--*
Today she receives the gift of a godfamily to remind her and accompany her along the way.
Her godfamily includes her parents and siblings and grandparents...
It includes the whole George clan, who so proudly stand as her sponsors today...
And it includes the rest of us, too. It includes the community of ALL the baptized--
ALL of us who have passed through the waters and who strive every day to discern
How we will shape our lives differently because of that identity--
Because of God's claim on our lives.

On Friday, I took this little jar of holy oil to a hospice unit.

I used it to anoint a man there who had been baptized here at Christ Church in 1922.

I told his children that we'd be using the oil again today to anoint little Sawyer...
Just like a priest of this Church anointed his infant brow some 94 years ago.

Using this same oil to anoint at the beginning of life and at the end,
is a reminder that God's claim on our life endures.

From font to grave, God's plea to us remains the same: "follow me."

And God's promise remains the same too: "you are my beloved Child, and I am with you."

This morning when we anoint Sawyer, we will say that she is "sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."

And what that means is that from now on, when she hears the words--

When any of us hear the words--"Today your life is being demanded of you"...

We can hear them *not* as a death threat, but rather, as an enduring **invitation to new life** in Christ.

###