

Positioned for Surprise  
Sermon 149 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 7, 2022  
Luke 12:32-40

Back in 2007, at the Goody's Cool Orange 500, a NASCAR race held in Martinsville, Virginia, the right rear wheel of Dale Jarrett's #44 Toyota came tumbling off in turn number 2. As spectators watched, Jarrett's car spun around and then limped its way to pit road. Thankfully, everyone was unharmed. The commentators had a bit of fun once they realized everyone seemed to be ok. They laughed as the lone wheel marked its course around the track and even made its way to pit road – completely detached from the vehicle and any form of steering. Retired driver turned commentator, Darrel Waltrip, had the most fun as he started singing the old Kenny Rogers song, You picked a fine time to leave me... loose wheel.

His sung commentary made such an impact on the sport that others have joined in the song. Each time a wheel comes off – which happens more often than you might think – someone summons Darrell Waltrip and starts humming that old familiar tune.

The thing that I want to know, though, is in a sport like NASCAR, where the wheels would seem to play a pretty important role in one's success or failure... Why are there so many loose wheels? Why are there so many occasions to hum this tune and sing these words and laugh alongside DW as the races press on?

Well, it turns out that keeping the wheels on (so to speak) is actually not so easy. Each wheel is held on by a group of lug nuts that come with specific torque ratings. During a race, when the driver brings the car into the pit, the crew has to replace the wheels as quickly as possible, tightening the lug nuts on the new wheel with exact precision, according to the specs. Too tight and the tension will be off, straining the threads and producing so much force that the nut can break. Too loose and there will be vibration as the wheel goes around and around. Either scenario and you could have a Darrell Waltrip solo situation on your hands.

You picked a fine time to leave me...

While many of us in this room may not be NASCAR fans, may not even be "car people", the truth of the matter is, much of nature, much of life, and much of faith are informed by this same principle. Hold on too tight, something is bound to break. Not enough, it'll slip away.

This same tension is apparent in today's Gospel reading from Luke 12. Jesus is instructing the crowds and disciples, warning against greed, encouraging faith in God, and reminding everyone that there is more to life than physical and material realities.

In today's reading, Jesus' advice is sandwiched between a comforting promise: Do not be afraid, and a warning: You must be ready ...

In between these two exhortations, and in true parabolic fashion, Jesus employs images of baby sheep, quality pocketbooks, eternally lit lamps, and household workers who are always alert and ready for their boss's return. But "who [can realistically] manage to be ever on the alert - never dozing off or fuzzing out?"<sup>1</sup> Hold on too tight, something is bound to break.

Just thinking about that kind of unbroken attention makes us tired and anxious. Like the women awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, we worry that the exact moment we need to walk away, to refill our lamps, to take nap, or grab a snack... that will be the moment when the bridegroom returns and Jesus comes calling. So we wait, as faithfully as we can, holding on as long as possible to everything we think might prove us worthy.

Most of the time our "holding on" comes from a reasonable place, and can include a myriad of different things. We can hold onto money to show that we are frugal, responsible, and strategic. We can hold onto the past so that we can protect ourselves from the losses we have incurred. We can hold onto traditions and rituals, enjoying the comfort they provide. We can even hold onto theologies, stories, language, and images of God that built our faith foundations but are now in need of rehabilitation. We hold on with all our might, afraid that if we loosen our grip, the wheels might wobble and come flying off.

We want to preserve the traditions, the rituals, and the customs so that we will be found righteous and ready. But then we look to Jesus as our guide, and we see that so often, his ministry was about stretching those same things; expanding the traditions, the rituals, and the customs in favor of inclusion, welcome, and love.

Jesus seemed to know the divine torque settings, the exact specs for faithful living in uncertain times. Jesus seemed to know how to remain ready and righteous, without becoming rigid.

If only we had access to that same user guide! Maybe then, we could also align our lives within the parameters of not too loose, not too tight so the wheels wouldn't wobble, break, or roll away while we are speeding through our lives.

On the other hand, if we did have such a manual, a guide for every situation and circumstance, where would we find freedom and beauty?

Remember that just before the section of the Gospel we read today, he had been teaching about greed. The Parable of the Rich Fool who stored up wealth until his barns were so full that he had to build bigger ones. Certainly, we can understand a desire to build up a little savings, especially in times of economic uncertainty.

But then, Jesus follows that with words of assurance, saying: Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them...

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Schlafer. 335.

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field... how much more will God clothe you? (v. 24, 27, 28)

So often – and perhaps it is because of our own sense of economic uncertainty – we hear these teachings as if they are only about our money. But what if they are about so much more than that? What if he is reminding us of the dangers of absolutes? He did begin this whole discourse by saying, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees.”

Isn't it possible that Jesus is warning against holding on too tightly? Not only to our money but to whatever it is that offers the same sense of superficial comfort, often at the expense of our ability to show love to God and neighbor?

The people came in search of absolutes and clear instructions – they wanted the specs. But Jesus gave them a story.

Flannery O'Connor once said, “A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what the story is about, the only proper thing is to tell them to read the story.” So when someone asks, “What is the gospel?” The best response is, “Let me tell you a story.”<sup>2</sup>

Storytellers and other creatives are often so good at finding that balance between too little and too much. Their crafts depend upon it. Too much and the reader, observer, participant cannot imagine themselves within it. The characters are too limited, the colors too rigid, the language too certain. But not enough and the audience does not know who the players are, or what story is even being told.

If you've ever known a writer, a painter, a storyteller... or maybe even a mathematician or engineer trying to solve a problem you know that sometimes they can experience writer's block or frustration with the problem at hand. Sometimes as they seek to create or solve they can become so fixated on the elements in front of their eyes that they cannot see any possibility for resolution. Writers call this “writer's block” but I am sure they aren't the only ones who feel it.

In times like these, as strange as it may seem, often the best way to move through the “block” is to walk away... to release the pressure, the stress... to let off on their grip and sense of absolute control. Staring at a blank page waiting for inspiration to come is like being on high alert 24/7, and no one can sustain that level of focus. So the seasoned writers (and I'd say this is true of any craftsman, artist, creative, problem solver, or just any human being for that matter) know that they have to take a break. And often, it is precisely during that “break” that the “breakthrough” comes.

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, (1389 in Jake's quotes)

This may seem like practical wisdom, but I think this is precisely the spiritual wisdom that Jesus is trying to convey, here, in Luke's Gospel.

"Being on high alert and being asleep at the switch are not our only alternatives. We can focus our anticipation, our watchful waiting, in ways that are neither fixed nor fuzzy." We can cultivate a spiritual peripheral vision as we live our lives with great faith. As the famous preacher, Gene Lowry said it, we can "position ourselves to be surprised,"<sup>3</sup> recognizing that God often breaks through, draws near, intervenes, and interrupts when we least expect it.

Maybe the words of warning: "you must also be ready" (v. 40) are not words of warning at all, but words of promise. Promise of a God who cares for us and desires to give us more than enough. But in order for us to receive God's blessings, we have to first create space enough to be surprised.

Maybe what Jesus is inviting us to do is release.

To unclench our grip just enough, to relinquish control, to walk away from the stories we are working so hard to write with our lives, and to trust our peripheral vision to let us know when God begins to break through.

Maybe this is how we make ourselves ready – not by becoming more rigid, more attached to all the things that bring us comfort, but by letting off on the pressure enough to give God room to write a new story, to create something beautiful within us.

The art on the cover of our bulletins this morning is by New York artist, Charlotte Lichtblau. She has a whole series of Christian art that you can find on her website, but this one is from her "still life" collection. It is called, Still Life with Jugs.<sup>4</sup> In a personal correspondence, the artist described her process of release saying, "I listen to the colors, who tell me, in good time, and in no uncertain terms, how I must proceed." And this process allows the painting to be at the same time a gift to, from, and through the painter.<sup>5</sup>

Friends, if there is one thing to hear from the Gospel today it is this:

God loves us, each and every one.

And God is trying to create something beautiful with and through our lives.

Something that is full of freedom and love.

Something that cannot be described or contained by any of our pre-ordained formulas because each story is uniquely worked out in relationship with God and neighbor.

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing on the Edge of Mystery*, in *Feasting on the Word*, 339.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.charlottelichtblau.com/still-life?pgid=jxmkjx3i-still-life-with-jugs\\_0](https://www.charlottelichtblau.com/still-life?pgid=jxmkjx3i-still-life-with-jugs_0)

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting*, 339

For this reason, there is no manual – other than the Bible and the holy stories that live within it. But these stories can be remarkably powerful if we allow them to teach us when to hold tight and when to let loose.

Once we accept this incredible gift: that God loves us, God cares for us, and that God is writing a beautiful story with our lives... then God can begin to work through us, relaxing our grip, loosening our need to control everything in our lives, and positioning us for a whole heap of holy surprise.

So be ready, for sure! For God is coming at an unexpected hour.