

other and open to the leading of the Spirit, and we are always seeking to be more and more open to our neighbors. The Spirit often surprises us with gifts like a new mission grant for this year in the amount of over \$30,000. We have opened ourselves to listen for guidance in how to use those funds faithfully in pursuit of God's will. But strength and openness are not what make us ready to serve God, or ready for the future. It's our dependence on God that makes us ready. It's our trust in God's presence with us that prepares us for what's next. It's our assurance of God's gift of grace that equips us for ministry.

As you know, today is the day we dedicate our pledges for the coming year. These pledges don't take effect until August. We make them early here because, yes, we do like to be ready and prepared. Whatever you have written down on your card—whether you are excited you can make an increase this year, whether you are struggling with the need to make a slight decrease, whether you, like Ken told us last week, are taking the plunge of signing that card for the very first time in your life, all of us can only do that because we depend on God. We're only ready to make the commitment of our resources because we trust in God's provision for our lives. Life is fragile and it comes with very few assurances. So no matter how much we prepare or pack or worry or haul along with us, none of that will necessarily help us on the journey. What can help us is our trust in the God who goes on the journey alongside us. Our God, in Jesus, has traveled a path filled with hardship and love. Our God has relied on the hospitality and support of others. So when we depend on God, we depend on one who does indeed get us. But not only that. Our God gets us and loves us, so that God can send us out to take the risk of serving, healing, loving, and helping. To join the mission that Jesus himself was on to bring equity to a lopsided world. To save us from the sin that breaks down relationships. To restore all people to wholeness and health. We are ready to serve on the journey ahead not because of our own resources, but because we depend on the God of Jesus Christ, who guides our every step.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



February 19, 2023

Seventh Sunday of Epiphany — Dedication Sunday

“Ready: How God Prepares Us”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 9:1-6

This month I joined a group that is helping equip pastors in Malawi for ministry. In April, a team from North Carolina is heading to Malawi, which is located in Southern Africa. At the meeting folks were talking about packing for their trip. Besides clothes and shoes, they're hauling a whole load of large heavy, study Bibles. They're praying that they don't go over the airline's weight limit. It may seem odd to ferry books across the ocean like that. But the team reported that the study Bibles will be gifts for new pastors who are graduating from the theological college there. It turns out that many of these new pastors don't own a Bible. Though they've studied for years and are ready to go out and minister to a new flock, they don't have a copy of the scriptures to call their own.

That's stunning isn't it?! I grant that my house may be unique, but we have quite a few different Bibles on our shelves, including a couple of those hefty study Bibles. And I bet some of you do, too. That's an embarrassing wealth of resources in comparison.

Which takes us to the story in Luke. That, too, is a story of ministers being sent out, seemingly without the very things they would need to be successful. But not because of a lack of resources, but rather at the insistence of Jesus himself. As someone who really likes to be prepared, this story raises my anxiety a little bit. Jesus was sending his disciples out to do amazing things. He gave them power and authority to heal, to root out evil, and to proclaim the news about God's kingdom. But he wouldn't let them take any supplies. “Take nothing for your journey,” Jesus said. When I read that, I hear its modern equivalent “You don't get to take anything. No umbrella, no backpack, no trail mix, no cell phone, no credit cards, no cash.” Jesus said that on this journey, there would be no excess. No items that pretend to offer security. Nothing to come between you and the mission.

Luke's story is no defense for our world's ridiculously lopsided wealth, that prevents even some pastors from owning a Bible. But it does make us rethink what is possible, even when we don't seem to have the right equipment. It makes us wonder what being ready to serve looks like, when it has nothing to do with stuff we bring. Surely those new pastors in Malawi are still ready to start ministering to their people—offering prayer, doing funerals, preaching and holding prayer meetings—whether they hold a Bible in their hands or not. Surely they know enough of God's story to share it and to use it in ministry, whether or not they know the exact word in chapter 12 verse 8. Perhaps what makes us ready to serve is not the equipment we bring, but the One who goes with us.

I think a key to Luke's story is to flip the script. The focus isn't actually on what the disciples didn't have. Jesus wanted them to focus on all that they did have. They had the presence of God, the power of Christ, and the promise of hospitality given by other people. That was the only "stuff" they needed. Those gifts are what made them ready for everything they might encounter.

God's gifts were enough. But in the ways of the world, they may not have seemed like very much at all. David Lose is a Lutheran pastor and commentator who writes, "true power resides in dependence. That is, when you are confident of being taken care of by others, when you don't feel the need to hoard resources or take all kinds of preventative or preparatory measures, you are really free. Or maybe the reverse is equally true: when you have been empowered by God, you are free from worrying about everything and are strong enough to depend on others...[s]imply because you trust that God will provide."¹

Dependence is not a popular concept in our day. No one especially wants to feel dependent. And many of us, intentionally or not, look down on those who seem to be dependent. Our society strives for independence, making our own way, relying only on ourselves. But our faith in Christ teaches a different way. What prepares us to serve, what readies us to encounter God is dependence. Reliance not on our own limited abilities, but on God's limitless grace. With God, dependence is not a picture of weakness or ineptitude. It is a picture of freedom and power. As Lose says, when you fully depend on God, you can be free of the worries of preparing and planning and gathering. Instead, there is space for trusting the goodness of other people. There is time to share the good news. There's room to connect with God, more than just what gets squeezed in at the margins.

Many of you have heard me talk about my own time serving in Malawi before. When my parents moved here this fall, I came across the journal I kept for the six months I lived in Malawi. (It's the one and only time in my life I've sort of successfully kept a journal.) Boy, reading it took me back. It was not quite 20 years ago that I was there. Despite all the vaccines I got and the way I perfectly packed my two suitcases, I was not at all prepared for what I encountered. I was not ready to face everyday life without running water when the pipes ran dry at the end of the season. I was not ready for the house I lived in to be broken into just days before I arrived. I was not ready for the challenge of teaching students who I struggled to communicate with.

But those six months were also the time in my life when I depended on God more than I ever had and ever have since. Every day I asked God to help me, to get me through just that one day. My church family back at home helped me, too, by praying for me and writing to me. The people I met in Malawi were wonderful and kind, too. But nothing much else helped me through it except my faith in the goodness of God and the certainty that God was leading me.

I did not relish that feeling of dependence. It is not a comfortable emotion for me. But there was certainly something to it. Something that electrified and connected me to God in a totally new way. That time pushed me to remember that I couldn't be in control. It reminded me I was held, led, and loved by a God who would not protect me from hardship, but who was present with me in the thick of it.

Maybe you are going through a time of deep dependence on God right now. Or maybe you have been through a time like that in the past. There is usually nothing glorious about those times; they can be some of our hardest. Not always, but sometimes, that dependence on God opens us to a new way of relating to the Holy One. Sometimes, it makes us ready to discover something new in our faith. Or ready to act in a different way.

For the disciples, Jesus urged them to depend on God for everything. God, through the goodness of others, would offer them shelter, food, and hearts willing to receive the good news. And that was what made them ready to go out. Ready to serve. Ready to bring their whole selves to the mission of healing others and helping them in the name of Christ.

These past weeks we have celebrated that our church is strong in faith and in love. We have strong, gifted leaders serving on our leadership boards and in all kinds of other ways—people I can depend on and trust 110% when tough stuff comes. And come it does. Our church is open to each