

Year C, Proper 14
Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16; Luke 12:32-40
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
August 12, 2007
The Rev. John Spicer

“Prepare to Meet God”

In June, Ann and the kids and I were blessed to be able to take a vacation together, driving out to see Ann's aunt in Hickory, North Carolina. Along the way there and back, we stopped to see lots of fascinating things, including a place I'd never heard of: the Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee. The museum houses all kinds of glimpses into Appalachian culture – its music, domestic arts, agriculture, education, nearly everything you can imagine about life in that region.

Among the displays there is the scene that appears on the cover of the bulletin this morning. These road signs are a few examples of the work of a man named Harrison Mayes, a coal miner from Fork Ridge, Tennessee, who heard a call from God to prepare the nation for the coming of Christ. Beginning in 1918, Mr. Mayes committed his spare time to making road signs and placing them along the highways of Appalachia and beyond, telling people the time had come to “get right with God” and secure their place in heaven. Some of these signs are more confrontational than others. My personal favorite, which you can't really see in the photo on the bulletin, is this subtle reminder: “Remember, if you go to hell, it's your own fault.”¹

It's easy to laugh at this colorful character from a different time and place. But actually, in his own particular way, Harrison Mayes was onto something. Those road signs proclaiming “Jesus is coming soon” and “Prepare to meet God” really do capture the message in today's Gospel reading.

Jesus is trying to give his followers a sense of urgency about getting ready for God's rule over the world as we know it. In fact, he couches all this in impossible terms in order to make the point. He says his followers need to be “dressed for action and have their lamps lit” at all times so that when the master returns, they'll be ready to welcome him (Luke 12:35). Even if the master returns from the heavenly banquet in “the middle of the night, or near dawn,” he expects his followers to be prepared (Luke 12:38). For those who are ready, Jesus says, the master will come and serve them, giving them their own share in the banquet of the kingdom of heaven. But for those who aren't ready, there seems to be no place at the table. Jesus doesn't say explicitly, “If you go to hell, it's your own fault.” But there is a clear sense that some servants will be there at the heavenly banquet, reveling in the joy of being served by their master, while those who weren't ready won't be.

So what makes the difference? Who are the slaves who are “alert” and “dressed for action, with [their] lamps lit”? Let's look back at the other two readings we heard this morning. They're about Abraham, the model of faith strong enough to turn life in a totally new direction. Abraham is God's first covenant partner. He's minding his own business in his own land, in Mesopotamia, when Yahweh calls to him and tells him to leave everything he knows and set out for a “land that [God] will show [him],” a place he can find by faith alone (Genesis 12:1). And not only that, God promises Abraham that even though he and his wife have no children in their advanced age, God will make their descendants “as many as the stars of heaven” (Hebrews 11:12).

Of course, the truly remarkable thing about this story is that Abraham believed all this. He heard God's astounding promise of a future he couldn't even imagine, and Abraham actually said, "OK; sign me up." This was not simply faith in the sense of a statement of belief. This was faith with meat on its bones. Abraham did what God asked, letting go of everything he had and everything he knew about himself in the assurance that something far better was waiting for him than the life he had spent decades building. As Hebrews puts it, "He looked forward to the [heavenly] city..., whose architect and builder is God" (11:10).

Jesus' message to us is the same, both individually and as a church community. He's telling us to get ready to enter a new land, to live under God's rule instead of our own. He recognizes that what he's asking is scary, but he says, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 12:32). Like Abraham, we need to leave behind our attachments here so that we can be unburdened enough to follow where Christ calls us – outside our comfort zones, outside our focus on ourselves, into this Christian community, and into the world around us. God knows that we need all the things we need in our lives, as Jesus says just before today's reading; and God will provide them. God knows we need food and clothing and school supplies for the kids. God knows the church needs to pay its utility bills, and pay the staff, and fix the roof when it leaks (over and over again). But the way to be faithful isn't by stressing out about whether we'll have enough money to take care of everything that needs to be done. "Do not keep striving for what you are to drink and what you are to eat," Jesus says, "and do not keep worrying. For ... your father knows that you need [these things]. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." (Luke 12:29-31)

And how do we strive for that kingdom? Oddly enough, it's not by working harder to get something we think we need; it's by letting go of some of the things we've been working so hard to get. "Sell your possessions and give alms," Jesus says. "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:33-34) The way for us servants to get ready for the master's coming is to stop trying to be in control and let the king run the kingdom instead.

It's not that all the stuff of the world is inherently bad – far from it. After all, God provides us with the stuff of the world, generously loaning it to us for our free use while we're here. It's just that the stuff can't become the point. Consider this, from the author Joan Chittister. She writes,

Things do not destroy us. It's the way we approach things that entraps us....
[P]eople who lack the necessities of life often spend their time ... consumed with thoughts of subsistence ... and clawing for survival. On the other hand, people smothered by things run the risk of slipping into indolence or becoming blinded to the important things of life. In striking a balance between the two, [we seek] ... to free the body so that the soul can soar.²

Jesus asks us to get rid of our possessions not because they're bad but because our attachment to them keeps us stuck in a kingdom of our own making. That applies equally to us as individuals and to us as the Body of Christ in this place. When our bottom line isn't money and things, our souls are freed to soar.

The other thing we can't afford to miss in the reading today is that there is some urgency to this message. It seems to pop up out of nowhere, like one of those road signs telling us to "Prepare to Meet God." Jesus calls us to get ready for his reign over us and all creation, and he says to do it now, not later. We can't know when we'll be required to give an account of our faithfulness in following that call, but we are told it'll be when we least expect it – as we simply

exist in sleepy satisfaction, comfortable in the thought that we don't really need to bother with meeting anyone else's expectations of us. As much as we Episcopalians hate judgment, we can't get around the message here that Christ does expect things of us and does hold us accountable for them. Maybe the Appalachian sign maker was a little over the top in his approach to spreading the word. But the truth is, some of the master's servants will be ready, and they will be dining with him at the heavenly banquet. And others won't be. At the end of the day, if we aren't there at the table, I guess it is our own fault.

What makes the difference, Jesus tells us, are our answers to a few seemingly simple questions: Are we willing to follow when God tells us to get up and go? Can we believe God's astounding promise to bring new life out of what is old and dying within us? And finally, how much are we willing to leave behind? Like the road signs say, the time to ask these questions is now, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

1. For more information, see the "Harrison Mayes Page." Available at <http://smithdray.tripod.com/hmayes-index-7-1.html>. Accessed Aug. 8, 2007.

2. Chittister, Joan. *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. 147.