

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Mark 14:12-16

How long does it take to paint a bedroom? Not very long, actually. Unless you count deciding what color to use, going to the store to buy supplies, moving the furniture, putting out a drop cloth, putting up painters tape around all the woodwork, baseboard, windows and doors, filling cracks or holes in the wall, and then finally getting your rollers, brushes, paint, and ladders out and ready to go. You can paint an average bedroom in about two hours — if you don't count all the other stuff. The work of preparation takes time — and is important work.¹

In our text from Mark this morning, Jesus had clearly done his work of preparation. When the disciples ask Jesus where to go to prepare for the Passover Meal, Jesus outlines the work he has already done and the preparations that are to be made. Jesus tells them that if they follow a man carrying a jar of water, a situation that would be recognizable since it was typically women who carried jars of water, they would be led to a house with a guest room already furnished and ready for their meal. From there, the disciples could easily finish the preparations. And when they enter the city, they found everything exactly as Jesus had told them.

This story of preparation may remind you of the preparation Jesus made for his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus told the disciples to go into the city to untie and bring to him a colt that had never been ridden. When the owner inevitably asked why they were doing this all they needed to say was “the Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” The disciples were able to accomplish everything just as Jesus had said, borrowing the colt with ease from its owner.

Preparation is essential for any meal or event. When we have guests over, we typically clean house, go grocery shopping, and make sure we have everything available to make them comfortable. If we are preparing for an event, we publicize it in advance to generating excitement and we make sure all the details are attended to. Most people don't know how much prep work has been done to carry out a successful meal or event, but they notice when the prep work has not been done. When the event or meal gets out of control, those participating can tell that all the details probably were not attended to.

What these verses in Mark tell us is that God has everything under control. The finding of the colt, the man carrying the water, the room and the furnishings being prepared—everything is done by Jesus' authority. Nothing is left to chance and nothing is meaningless. Jesus even works everything for his purposes, using the significance of the Passover meal to make sure his disciples understand what he is about to do by going to the cross. So, he goes to his death, not because something has gone wrong, but because he intended to use it for his own purposes. The disciples are invited to participate in both of these instances in Mark, but it is Jesus who ultimately has control over how things play out. It is Jesus who orchestrates all of the preparations.

What does it look like for Jesus to have this same control and authority in our lives? Well first, in order for us to allow Jesus to be in control we have to relinquish our control. If we are to honestly and authentically pray in the Lord's Prayer “your kingdom come,” we must also be willing to let go of our control by praying “our kingdoms go.” There isn't enough room for our kingdom and Christ's kingdom, but releasing our kingdom and authority for Christ's kingdom and authority is frightening. It's certainly an unsettling place.

¹ homileticonline.com

US Navy divers must all pass a Mental Toughness Program where they are placed underwater in a deep pool with a breathing tank for 20 minutes while their trainers perform a series of attacks on their air supply. Each trainee is expected to remain calm, untangle the obstacle that is interfering with the breathing apparatus and remain underwater for the full time. Before they go through this test, the divers are taught how the brain works. They learn how to overcome the amygdala, the part of the brain where fear is processed, in order for the frontal lobes, where reasoning takes place, to take over. The divers must accept their fate without fear so that they can respond in helpful and sustainable ways.²

Unlike the diver, however, we may feel like we have less agency when God is in control. We may be more like the ball player standing on the court, face to face with God, who asks us to hand over the ball saying, “The game’s over. Let the ball be in my court.” To hand over the ball means we no longer have to compete, but it also means we hand over the control.³

We may give this type of self-emptying lip service, but it is a whole lot more difficult than it sounds. However, when we can truly let go, we learn that it is only in recognizing our lack of control that God can effectively prepare our lives. In realizing that there is a power outside of ourselves, we realize that there is something greater than our smallness. This is a freeing realization. We don’t have to be greater than we are but can accept ourselves in order for God to be great. Rather than feeling out of control, our very lack of control is a sign of God’s presence in the world. As Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams write: “It is precisely because of our smallness that we can come to see and trust the greatness of God that surrounds us.”⁴

It is unavoidable at this point in my sermon to address the rather large elephant in the room. Pastor Tim and I recognize that we have, in and of ourselves, already had some time to prepare for our coming departure from this church and that you all as the congregation have not. The news is fresh for you. The process has to work this way, but we recognize that this doesn’t make it easier. It has been and will continue to be a difficult decision and we are trying our best to receive the myriad of emotions our news has brought out of this congregation. The discernment work thus far has been ours, but your work begins now as your dream of what comes next.

However, the work of preparation has already started. God always knew that this would be a season of transition. Before this time of transition began, God knew that we would have wonderful times of blessings and growth and opportunity together. But even knowing all this, transition would inevitably come, and God has been working behind the scenes to prepare for it. God has strengthened people for lives of faith in this place. God has called new leaders to lead with innovation and vision, and God has deepened our love for one another. God has been working and God is working to prepare the disciples in this place, maybe not for a Passover Meal, but for time and seasons to pass to another.

There is a time and space for all of us to grieve this change. As Peggy Hahn writes, “Change is about loss and loss is about grief.” While time to move into a new future, this decision comes with great sadness and pain. But we do not grieve as ones without hope. God

² homileticonline.com

³ Nadia Bolz-Weber, interviewed by Jesse James DeConto, “Why hipster pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber thinks the church is for losers,” *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2015. washingtonpost.com. Retrieved September 18, 2018.

⁴ Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams, *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for All That Is* (Liturgical Press, 2010), 10-11. Thanks to Travis Webster, Forest Lake Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina, in an e-mail correspondence with *Homiletics*.

goes ahead of all of us to prepare the space that is coming so that we can do what needs to be done knowing that God is there too.

In fairy tales, times of transition are easy. All you need is a magic wand. With the simple wave of a wand the prince becomes a toad, Cinderella is ready for the ball, or Pinocchio becomes a real boy. But that's not the way it works in real life. Instead it's more like training for a race — there are setbacks, goals to be achieved, and hard moments, but all the work leads to growth and triumph.

Steve Nash, retired NBA player, once said about his basketball career, “You have to rely on your preparation. You [have] to really be passionate and try to prepare more than anyone else, and put yourself in a position to succeed, and when the moment comes, you [have] to enjoy, relax, breathe and rely on your preparation so that you can perform, and not be anxious or filled with doubt.”⁵ Luckily as Christians, we have someone who prepares us for what is to come, who already knows what will come. Jesus tells the disciples to go find the colt because he already knows that they will be able to retrieve the colt for Jesus' use. Jesus tells the disciples how to prepare for the Passover Meal because he already knows what is to come. The one who prepares in 1st century Palestine also prepares in our lives. He invites us to enjoy, relax, breathe and rely on his preparations. We need not be anxious or filled with doubt.

Everything is under control. And like Paul wrote to the Romans, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). So, we walk ahead knowing that God prepares the way. The ball is in God's court. Amen.

⁵ homileticonline.com