

## Dressed for Action

Luke 12:32-40

This past week the summer Olympic Games began in Rio de Janeiro. I was wondering how the US track and field team have dressed for their competition over the years. The modern Olympic Games began in 1896, and I have looked up pictures of how athletes have dressed for action over these years. What I have noticed is that athletes have shed some of their weights to be ready for action.

The main thing that our scripture tells us to do is shed our fear if we will be ready for action. There is so much to fear: terrorism; war; the economy; global warming; unemployment, hunger, poverty, homelessness; disease and death. It is impossible to escape: walk the neighborhoods, drive the interstates, see the signs all around. If you prefer, stay at home, where newscasters proclaim the bad news from studio sets, texts crawl at the bottom of television screens, information updates flash in Web browsers, and spam e-mails announce that we are doomed if we do not buy the right products immediately. If we were not afraid before, we are certainly encouraged by the media and our culture to be afraid now. Into that fear, across centuries of human experience, Jesus' teaching offers an extraordinary word of comfort in an increasingly threatening world: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" ([v. 32](#)).

This is not whistling-in-the-dark comfort, but rather the reassurance that what is seen is not all that is, a reminder that the fears attendant upon earthy living need not have the last word in defining one's life. The text weaves a tapestry of claims about God (embodied in Jesus and his teaching) around the tenuous thread of human existence. God is "your Father"; God's "good pleasure" is to give the

kingdom, a treasure in heaven that is imperishable. These reminders of God's sovereignty and gracious protection, along with the promise of the Son's return, serve as antidotes to the human problems of misplaced confidence, complacency, and fear of an uncertain future.

Given the number of reminders not to worry or be afraid that appear in Luke 12, the first hearers of this gospel message must have had reason to fear many things. What about us, what about you? Are you afraid of being killed, Jesus asks? Remember that God is concerned even with the hairs of your head (12:4-7). Are you worried about having the right words when you must make a defense of the gospel? Have confidence that the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say (12:8-12). Does fear of an uncertain future cause you to disregard the needs of others and to stash your possessions in a spirit of greediness? Recall that you cannot take it with you at the end of your life (12:13-21). Are you worried about your life, about food or clothing—or designer shirts, stylish cars, a fat bank account, or any of the other outward signs that one has "made it" in the eyes of the world? At even a more basic level, are you afraid of starvation and nakedness? Do not let your concern for these things turn you away from what is most important: striving for the kingdom (or reign) of God (12:22-31). It is not necessary to be anxious about life and death (human finitude) or about food and clothing (earthly possessions). These are human means of protection and well-being, but they compare little with God's means. Worrying about them will not make a difference, in one's life or in one's death. Worry and fear are to be shed if we are to dress for action.

Dress for action by accepting with confidence God's promises. It is like wear good athletic shoes. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This is not a God who, after creating the universe, sits back and dispassionately watches it all unfold. This is a God who attends to sparrows, ravens, and lilies, a God whose concern for humankind

extends to the very hairs on our heads, a God whose desire is to give the treasure of heaven. The consistent message throughout the passage is not, "Be ready so that you will avoid punishment," but, rather, "Be ready so that you will receive blessing." After all, those who are ready when the master returns will be the recipients of a heavenly feast (vv. 37-38).

God's providence enables a response that runs counter to the human tendency to be afraid, a response that challenges the trend to hold on to what one has, in order to protect against what might happen. "Sell your possessions, and give alms" (v. 33), Jesus says, calling on his followers to place their confidence in the imperishable things of heaven, rather than in the moth-eaten things in their own backyards. So to dress for action we are to share with the poor. The passage challenges us with a simple test: Do we want to live lives of taking, or do we want to live lives of giving? The answer we give reveals the truth of our hearts (v. 34) and opens (or closes) us to the blessings that God is prepared to give.

The blessings offered, that dress us for action, are known most fully by those who are no longer afraid of potential danger, darkness, and death, those who live the sorts of lives that many persons across time and continents cannot begin to embrace or comprehend. Human sinfulness encourages us to believe that giving, instead of taking, will lead to destitution, deprivation, and desperation. The gospel promises, however, that giving from what we have will make us mindful of the God of blessing, and ready to receive the gifts that God offers. So, dress for your action by your generosity.

The less we want to have, the less we need to have. This fact is itself one of the blessings God offers, with compound interest. The less we need to have, the less we need to fear. The less we need to fear, the more we know that a life of giving allows us always to live, not on the brink of destruction, but on the brink of

blessing, where we can more readily hear the promise that the "Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour," desiring not to punish but to bless. **Audrey West**

This text also teaches us to place first things first. The things of God are to be given the most urgent priority in every Christian's life. Neither fear nor worldly distraction is to lure the children away from God's tender, attentive care. There are no purses, or stock portfolios, of human creation that will not wear out in time. God promises to surprise with the gift of the kingdom those who stand ready and waiting to receive this singular treasure.

In this lesson Jesus speaks a surprising word of comfort to all whose lives are speeding along at a frantic pace. *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom"* (v. 32). Simply said, what God gives as a gift does not have to be purchased with our wealth. As faithful children of God we are free to lavish our wealth on others in need. Not shame but amazingly tender concern stands at the core of our scripture. This is an invitation to trust that our future rests in the gracious promises and presence of God, who asks us to dress for action.

When anxiety and fear beset us as a community of faith—snatching away our confidence like a petty thief—God can restore what we have lost. Jesus reminds us who God is in our lives. God desires to give us treasure that does not fade or fail. We can be brave, patient, and calm in the face of a crisis because we do not stand alone. We only need to trust in God's provision for our future. Jesus tells that God is the master who returns to his household late at night. To illustrate for the disciples the importance of being ready and waiting, and dressed for action, Jesus pictures God's donning an apron and serving a midnight banquet to those found alert and expectant. Can we imagine this scene retold by future generation as they worship in this space? What would it look like to discover God in their very midst, serving an impromptu meal in the fellowship hall? Jesus said God, who comes in

surprising ways to offer comfort, assurance, and lasting treasure to God's little flock. Our priorities should be in keeping with God's priorities, in this way we are dressed for action.

God may not come at a time when we are in worship. Where might we look to see the kind of God who dons an apron and serves those who wait for the things of God? Would that happen in the break room at the nearby office complex, so maybe you will be wearing a business suit; or in the cafeteria of the local hospital, so maybe you will be wearing a nurse's or doctor's lab coat; or maybe you will be in the kitchen at home, so you will be wearing your everyday clothing. Wherever the simplicity of God's tender assurance intersects with our frenzy and fretting and anxious lives is where we are called to be dressed for action. **Patricia J. Lull**

As we remember that, like the servants awaiting the coming of their master from a wedding banquet, we are to be ready and dressed for action when Jesus returns. The servants who were congratulated (v. 37a, 38b) were those whom the master found vigilant as they actively anticipate their master's certain return, even though they were uncertain of its timing. Jesus declared that their master will take on the role of servant to honor and wait upon such vigilant servants. This role reversal anticipated Jesus knowing that his death (22:24-27) would be of great service to us.

What is the ultimate concern of our lives? Why must we be dressed for action? Our scripture says that our ultimate concern is God's kingdom, because it was God's pleasure to include us in this divine reign. Consequently what we need, accumulate, and possess in life is transitory. God's delightful decisions for us empower us to use our possessions and our time to enact the values and agenda of God's kingdom in the present as we anticipate its ultimate coming in the future.

**Richard P. Carlson**

My brothers and sisters, like the Olympic athletes, we need to dressed for action and be ready when Jesus returns.

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