

An Unexpected Hour **Christy Stang, 8/11/2019**

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” I used to read this passage and think it only applied to preparing for that ultimate moment when Jesus returns to us. However, I think there is not only one “unexpected hour,” but many. God surprises us in our lives every day, although we may not always be able to see it. We are not only preparing for Jesus’ ultimate return at an unexpected hour, but for the unexpected moments of connecting with God’s presence every day.

When I was little, I had a green firefly costume that I wore for Halloween. Every year that we decided that was going to be the costume I wore, we had to check the batteries in it because it had a light up tail. I had to make sure I was dressed and ready to go with the costume lit. As a five-year-old, the most important thing for me to think about was not the details of my Halloween costume, but the act of going out and trick or treating that I had been preparing for. The details of the costume and how I prepared myself mattered to some degree, but my state of excitement and attention about Halloween was the focus. Preparation means sorting out our lives to make sure everything is in order for the arrival of Christ, but most importantly it points to our attention. *Grygorountas*, the Greek word used in this passage to mean “alert” emphasizes specifically the state of being awake. To be ready for God, we have to make sure that we are not sleeping when the right time comes.

In preparing for God, how do we dress for action and light our lamps? What does it mean to be spiritually alert? In Joan Chittister’s commentary on the Rule of Benedict, she includes a short story about preparation.

The ancients say that once upon a time a disciple asked the elder, “Holy One, is there anything I can do to make myself enlightened?”

And the Holy One answered, “As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning.”

“Then of what use,” the surprised disciple asked, “are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?”

“To make sure,” the elder said, “that you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise.”

The Rule of Benedict recommends sleeping fully clothed so as to be ready for whatever challenges the new day will bring. Now I don’t think we need to sleep in monks’ habits to be ready for God, but I do think it helps to ready our *hearts* for God. There will always be more that we can do to improve ourselves or to become more spiritually mature. Spiritual preparation is not about improving ourselves or about becoming spiritually superior. It is about being in a state of readiness to welcome God’s spirit. We cannot anticipate God’s every move. But as we are on the journey of drawing closer to Christ, we can fix our attention on God and be prepared in the sense of being

aware. We never know when God is going to speak to us through our lives, but if we allow ourselves to rest in spiritual openness and vulnerability, we will be prepared to receive God's presence into our hearts.

The first part of the passage from Luke explains to us that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Choosing to value God and paying attention to our relationship with the divine orients us to receive the presence of God in our hearts. Where we focus our attention ends up being where we find our greatest strength. However, as much as we can try to be on top of our own spiritual alertness, it is ultimately God who gives us the grace to even do that much. Brother Lawrence shares in the book *The Practice of the Presence of God* that "Neither skill nor knowledge is needed to go to God. . . . All that is necessary is a heart dedicated entirely and solely to Him out of love for Him above all others" (22). Choosing to focus on God and to identify God as our treasure opens the gateway in our souls to deep and transformational love.

Sometimes when God speaks to us in our lives, we are not prepared for it. In the moments when we find that we were not prepared, we are still given the opportunity to open our hearts and accept God in that moment. God catches us by surprise and grabs our attention to draw closer to the holy in the future. Sometimes we don't know that we are ready for something until we find ourselves in the midst of it. On the day before I came home from studying in Italy, I went with my friend Sarah to hang out with my friend Mattia and his 17 friends at an outdoor restaurant. Very Italian. It was fun to connect with everyone and have people ask about New York and Hamburgers and other American things that they found fascinating, and I found myself sitting near a rather feisty young woman with a bit of an abrasive personality. At one point, she asked me what I wanted to do after college, and I told her I was going to be a priest. There isn't a word in Italian that really connotes the right thing because most of the priests in Italy are catholic men, so it doesn't apply to my experience. She looked a bit shocked and disgusted and said to me "hai perso mille punti con me" which means, "you lost a thousand points with me."

I was taken aback. I still felt my mouth open as I tried to explain myself using different words by saying that it was like being a pastor, although I wasn't sure how well that term would be understood. Evidently it needed more explanation than I had anticipated because she seemed confused and Mattia came to my defense by trying to explain to her that it wasn't the kind of pastor who kept sheep, but someone who worked in a church. Again, rather gruffly, she asked why I would want to do that, presumably having an image in her head of an old catholic man instead of a young woman and seemed to be having difficulty reconciling the discrepancy between the two visuals. After explaining that I wanted to walk with people on their spiritual journeys and serve the church because it was a community that had already given me so much, her rigid demeanor softened a bit and she admitted that she had not understood at first what I wanted to do and respected it now that she heard more about what it entailed. It was a powerful moment for me of connecting with someone in a way I never would have expected. An experience that initially felt like a stumbling block ended up being a source of empowerment for me. God speaks to us when

we're not ready and engages with our preparation process. Preparing for God does not play out like going down a clean cut to-do list. We are never perfectly ready for God, but each unexpected hour of connecting with someone else in a meaningful way or recognizing something holy that surfaces in our lives becomes a stepping stone in a journey deeper into the presence of God. Ready or not, God shows up in our lives.

God has the power to show up unannounced and yet make us feel like we found a missing puzzle piece. That unexpected hour feels like home. It may be consciously unexpected, but it is what the deepest parts of our souls expect. In each "unexpected hour" that God becomes known to us, it feels familiar and right because we know deep down that it really isn't unexpected at all. Opening our hearts and minds to the love of God prepares us to notice more and more of the "unexpected hours" when God influences our lives. Whether we notice the presence of the divine right away or whether it catches us by surprise, God is not only the ultimate destination but also the road that takes us along the journey. So, let us be dressed and ready with the lamps of our hearts lit to welcome the presence of God in our lives today.