

**Proper 14, Year C**

8/7/2016

[Genesis 15:1-6](#)[Psalm 33:12-22](#)[Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16](#)[Luke 12:32-40](#)**Peripheral Vision**

Around May of 1905, Albert Einstein had a big problem. The seeds of what would be his theory of general relativity were rattling around in his brain, and he felt he was close to a breakthrough. He needed some help working through the problems he was encountering so he went to visit a good friend who had long been a sounding board. They sat together for hours trying to hash it out. They talked, counterpointed one another, but in the end, Einstein was ready to give up. He was exhausted and depressed. No matter how hard he tried to work it out, no matter how deeply focused he was, this new theory of his just didn't seem to work. He decided to go home, feeling like a failure.

When he got home that night his mind kept working, churning away. As he walked around the house an unusual image kept coming to his mind. It was a memory of riding on a streetcar where he lived in Bern, Switzerland. In his mind he imagined the streetcar streaking away from the city's famous clock tower at the speed of light. In this memory that would not leave his mind, all the cogs suddenly clicked into place. If he was going the speed of light away from the clock it occurred to him that the clock would appear to have stopped since light could not catch up to the streetcar, but the streetcar's clock would continue keeping time normally. This simple image that came to him out of nowhere was the answer to his problem: "time can beat at different rates throughout the

universe, depending on how fast you moved.” This was the key, the missing piece that allowed him to articulate his theory of relativity.<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever had an “epiphany” of sorts in this way? Tried to work out a problem, and no matter how much you thought on it, it just wouldn’t come together? Then, after you’d taken a break, and walked away, suddenly, there it was—inspired perhaps?—almost out of nowhere. For me I know there have been times when what I was supposed to preach on Sunday just would not come. Then, suddenly, in the middle of the night, or in the shower, or when talking to a friend, boom—there it is! Right there and I hadn’t even noticed it. A breakthrough right when I decided to take a break from the problem and to walk away. There was no way I could have predicted how and when the answer would appear.

“Be dressed for action,” Jesus says. “Be like those waiting for their master to return.” “Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” This passage, and ones like it that address Jesus’ return, have always confused me a little, even put me on edge. How am I supposed to stay alert all the time for Jesus’ return? What about my responsibilities? Am I supposed to abandon my family? Quit my job so that I can sit around waiting for Jesus to show up? The early church dealt extensively with this problem, and you can see pretty clearly in scripture where the writers start to realize that maybe Jesus’ return wasn’t as imminent as they had hoped. There’s also the problem of what does it mean exactly for Jesus to return? Some say Jesus’ return is only a one-time event in the future; others say it means the many returns we all experience when Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Michio Kaku, “The Theory Behind the Equation,” *NOVA* October 2005, PBS.org (accessed August 6, 2016), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/physics/theory-behind-equation.html>.

comes to us all the time in many different ways—Jesus returns in a manner of speaking every time we celebrate the Eucharist. Or maybe it’s about my own personal meeting with Jesus that will occur when I die. There is no doubt that I will meet Jesus, and that I have met Jesus. It’s all a matter of when and where. About this coming return (or returns), Jesus says, “Be alert.”

How can we be alert for Jesus all the time? Constant, unrelenting alertness to Jesus’ return might actually be counterproductive, says one writer. He points out that “nobody can remain indefinitely on the alert.”<sup>2</sup> We need to eat, sleep, work, and do many other things that will undoubtedly take up some of our attention. And, as we all know, from time to time, stepping away from intense focus can actually help to open up the mind, as many creative types know. Look at Einstein’s story. It wasn’t until he stepped away from intense focus, letting his mind wander while walking home, that—ta da!—the answer he was seeking came to him. Often what we’re searching for is lingering not in our direct line of sight, but rather in our peripheral vision.

Every year I go on retreat at the Jesuit Spirituality Center in Grand Coteau. My spiritual director on my retreat this year was an old Jesuit priest who told me a story about playing basketball in high school. He said he kept missing plays, letting his opponents shoot right by him. The coach worked with him and told him he needed to develop his peripheral vision. “It’s not just about what’s happening right in front of you with the person you’re guarding,” the coach told him. “It’s also about the players around you, and the bigger picture of the game.” As he started to pay more attention to his

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Schlafer, *Feasting on the Word*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3, *Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) (Kindle Edition)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Loc. 12277.

peripheral vision he was better able to notice things about the game that had eluded him before.

This is what I think Jesus means when he tells us to “be alert.” Not that we somehow need to indefinitely intensely focused. He means that we need to develop our peripheral vision so we can see more than just what’s right in front of us. With attuned peripheral vision we can begin to notice a wider spectrum of what’s happening around us that will allow us to be more alert to God’s presence in our lives.

Notice this passage starts out with the admonition that we hear over and over and over in scripture: “Do not be afraid.” Now, just like we cannot always be alert, we certainly cannot stop ourselves from being afraid of things. Fear is a natural barometer that can warn us when something’s wrong. Fear is like any emotion—they can’t be helped. They just are. Feelings aren’t smart. They just are. It’s how deal with them that matters. There are a lot of things in this world of which to be afraid, and our constant connectivity certainly won’t let us forget it. The economy. Terrorism. The presidential election. Natural disasters. Terrifying illnesses. Unassuming neighbors on a shooting rampage. The majority of information we receive is rooted in stoking our fears.<sup>3</sup>

God is perfectly aware of all of our fears, all of our self-doubt, all of our anxiety. And here we find Jesus saying to his disciples, to us, “Do not be afraid any longer.” He’s just finished saying in the previous section of this chapter of Luke that God knows people have needs. God knows we have worries. Yet, he reminds us, that amidst our need and worries a little trust is required. You don’t have to be afraid anymore. Why? Because God’s kingdom is coming into our very midst through him, and—get this, now—“*it is*

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<sup>3</sup> Eric H. F. Law, *Finding Intimacy in a World of Fear* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 21-23.

*your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*" It is God's *pleasure* to give you the kingdom. It makes God feel good to do this! It fulfills God to fulfill us. Jesus is trying to point out to us that God actually loves us. God loves *you!* He wants us to use our peripheral vision when we face all those fears so that we might remember that there's more to the story than the fears that assault us. The game is bigger than the player we're guarding right before our eyes. If we focus too much on the fear, and forget to step away and let our peripheral vision come more into focus, we might miss the big picture.

The late Fr. Anthony deMello—another good Jesuit—used to tell a story. There was a man who was charging back and forth through town on his horse, and the people watched with great concern. They finally asked him as, "Where are you off to?" And as he galloped quickly by he said, "I'm looking for my horse!"<sup>4</sup> There are a lot of things that take up our attention, and sometimes we miss the forest for the trees. We miss the good things that God has given us, the things we truly treasure, the places where our hearts resides. How many people on their death beds will say, "I wish I had worked more." "I wish I had given less." Or do most people say things like, "I wish I'd had more time with my family." "I wish I'd said and done the important things I never did." "I wish I'd made a purse that didn't wear out, a wallet I could stuff with the things that will endure."

When Jesus returns—whatever that looks like, and whenever it will be—he will return with a blessing. He always does. Like the man in the parable who returns to find his servants waiting for him, and he ends up serving them. He blesses them. Robert Capon reminds us of the little detail in the story that says the man is returning from a wedding. He's just come back from a party! Capon writes,

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony DeMello, *The Song of the Bird* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 10.

[The servants] great good luck is that he will come home in a hilarious mood. He will not come home with sober assessments of past performances or with grim orders for future exertions; rather he will come with a song in his tipsy heart, a chilled bottle of Dom Perignon in each tail of his coat, and a breakfast to end all breakfasts in his hands: bacon, sausage, grits, homefries, and eggs sunny-side up. We too, then, are blessed in the risen Jesus, for he comes to us from his nuptials in death, and asks only that we wait in faith for him. He will knock at the door of our own death, and he will come in and throw us a party.<sup>5</sup>

Maybe it seems strange to talk about death on a day we baptize infants, but think about it. We're here with them because we treasure them, and we want them to treasure the good things about this world. The beautiful things we know shine in our peripheral vision when we're not consumed with the worries and fears of the day. We come here to tell them that they're loved by the God whose blessings we await with eager longing, and in hope that they'll remember there's more to their stories than the fears and failures they will encounter. We come to tell them that God will come to them in blessing throughout their lives, and even someday in their deaths, if they only have the peripheral vision to notice. We come hoping to be surprised by God's blessings at the moment we least expect it.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 89.

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