

Getting Ready to Run  
July 2, 2017  
II Samuel 18:19-33, Luke 12:35-40  
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit*

My hunch is that to most of you, the name "Ahimaaz, son of Zadok" doesn't mean a whole lot. Have any of you ever heard or read about Ahimaaz? I didn't think so. He's a bit player in scripture. Stands off to the side, although he had a shot at something bigger, perhaps.



Ahimaaz's story comes to us as a sidebar to the year-long study of David in which we've been engaged. Do you remember Absalom, David's son? Last week, we talked about Absalom's revolt against his father wherein he captured the capital city of Jerusalem while King David was forced to flee. Ahimaaz was the son of Zadok, one of the priests that was loyal David. When Absalom took over the city, David arranged for a few spies to remain behind. Ahimaaz was the runner who would get the information from the spies and then deliver it to David. There are several episodes in chapters 16 & 17 where this young man acted heroically in the service of his King. In fact, it was Ahimaaz who eventually delivered the information that resulted in Absalom's defeat.

When we left the story last week, the conflict had ended and the victorious David was heading back to Jerusalem. At this point, David was aware of the outcome of the battle, but knew nothing of Absalom's fate. Late in the day, Absalom was fleeing and was discovered by a group of David's men. When they reported this to David's general, Joab. Joab

immediately killed Absalom and in the aftermath, David's troops gathered round.

One of the young men we see crowding up to the front of the scene is Ahimaaz. You heard this a few moments ago, and you know that even though Ahimaaz has been a trusted messenger during this civil war, Joab sends a stranger to report Absalom's death, because he knows that David has a habit of killing messengers who bring bad news. Ahimaaz wants to run. He wants to deliver the news that the battle is over. Joab says, "Look, son, run another day. You weren't here, you didn't see everything. Just leave it." And, as you heard, Joab dispatches a foreigner to carry the news to the king. But the more he thinks about it, the more Ahimaaz pesters Joab. Finally, perhaps because the Cushite had had a head start, Joab releases Ahimaaz. Listen:

*Ahimaaz son of Zadok again said to Joab, "Come what may, please let me run behind the Cushite."*

*But Joab replied, "My son, why do you want to go? You don't have any news that will bring you a reward."*

*He said, "Come what may, I want to run."*

*So Joab said, "Run!" Then Ahimaaz ran by way of the plain and outran the Cushite.*

*While David was sitting between the inner and outer gates, the watchman went up to the roof of the gateway by the wall. As he looked out, he saw a man running alone. The watchman called out to the king and reported it.*

*The king said, "If he is alone, he must have good news." And the runner came closer and closer.*

*Then the watchman saw another runner, and he called down to the gatekeeper, "Look, another man running*

*alone!”*

*The king said, “He must be bringing good news, too.”*

*The watchman said, “It seems to me that the first one runs like Ahimaaz son of Zadok.”*

*“He’s a good man,” the king said. “He comes with good news.”*

*Then Ahimaaz called out to the king, “All is well!” He bowed down before the king with his face to the ground and said, “Praise be to the Lord your God! He has delivered up those who lifted their hands against my lord the king.”*

*The king asked, “Is the young man Absalom safe?”*

*Ahimaaz answered, “I saw great confusion just as Joab was about to send the king’s servant and me, your servant, but I don’t know what it was.”*

*The king said, “Stand aside and wait here.” So he stepped aside and stood there.*

*Then the Cushite arrived and said, “My lord the king, hear the good news! The Lord has vindicated you today by delivering you from the hand of all who rose up against you.”*

*The king asked the Cushite, “Is the young man Absalom safe?”*

*The Cushite replied, “May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man.”*

*The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!”*



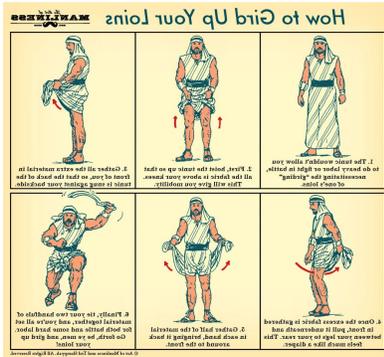
Ahimaaz is so intent on bringing the news that he outpaces the foreigner. He appears, first in the distance, then up close. He finally arrives, breathless, and David asks him what's happened. Ahimaaz reveals the truth about the outcome of the battle. David says, "What about the boy? How is my son?"

And here, Ahimaaz loses his composure. "Ahhhhhhh, yes your majesty, there was a crowd, you see. Lot of people . . . ." David implores him for news, and Ahimaaz hems and haws and stammers around until David finally pushes him aside and tells him to shut up. The Cushite runner appears and tells David the good news that is really bad news to this father's heart, and the last glimpse we have in scripture of Ahimaaz is of a breathless, confused messenger who doesn't really know what the message is. The one who was so anxious to be involved in the situation becomes irrelevant and powerless. It happens around him, or to him. He is powerless to affect the situation any more.

You might not know who Ahimaaz is, but I bet you know how it feels to be him. It may be that a friend comes to you and says, "I know I've blown it. My marriage is in a shambles, and I don't know where to start. What do you think I should do?" and you find yourself thinking, "Ohhhhhhhh, yeah, I know that the Bible says something about relationships. What was the pastor saying that one time?..." Or it may be that you've received a call from your local auto repair shop asking you to sign off on a repair order that's higher than you think it ought to be, but knowing that he's going to submit it to insurance anyway. You don't want to offend him, but you're not sure it's right...

We know how it feels to be Ahimaaz, I think. It is all too common a situation to find ourselves standing by the wreckage of some situation over which we might have had

some control, feeling powerless, not sure of what we should say or do, feeling irrelevant. "I wish I'd known... I couldn't... Who would have thought that... Isn't there something..."



Jesus is sitting with his disciples, seeking to prepare them for a life of ministry and service in a world that is not always excited about ministry and service, and he tells them to be ready. "Let your loins be girded - be dressed ready for service" he says. Do you remember seeing pictures or movies

from Bible times? All the men wearing these loose robe-like things? Now, imagine trying to run a race wearing one of them, or fight a battle, or chase after a wayward child. Couldn't do it, could you? Neither could they. When someone in scripture talks about "girding his loins" he means, wrapping the robe up a little higher and tighter, allowing more freedom of movement. If your loins are girded already, it means you're ready to respond in an instant - no delay at all.

Jesus then says that they should let their lamps be burning. Again, this is a signal for action. Finding light in those days was not as easy as flicking a switch, or even striking a match. It took some measure of work and preparation to ensure that you could light your lamp. Jesus says to be ready. Be prepared. You don't know when you're going to need it, so have it lit.



He tells a parable to explain what he's talking about. The owner of the house is away at a wedding feast. His servants are home, waiting for him, ready to spring to action the moment they hear his keys in the door. Their great fortune is that he is coming home in a fantastic mood,

still singing and dancing. He's got an extra bottle of bubbly in his coat and two sacks full of groceries in his hands. He doesn't talk about where they've failed or how they've fallen; he sits them down and cooks up the best: bacon, eggs, Belgian waffles, strawberries, home fries -- and serves them all breakfast. He is coming home from a party that he doesn't want to leave - so he brings the party with him.

If you've ever baby-sat, I bet you know a little about this. It's getting later and later, and they said you could fall asleep, but you don't want to. Finally, almost 3 in the morning, and here they come. They've got a sack of goodies from the party for you to eat, they overpay you, and take you home with the radio blasting. You are rewarded for your faithfulness by being included in the celebration.

Here's the deal. It's a typical summer Sunday in Crafton Heights. You're relieved that we don't have a super long service planned, you're irritated by the lack of air conditioning or padding in the pews, and you're glad to see that the Cross Trainers camp is going pretty well so far. So far, so good. We may have sung your favorite song, or maybe we missed it. It doesn't really matter... the question is, when we leave here in half an hour or so, what difference will any of this make? What are you going to do -- what are you, my parents, my children, my brothers and sisters in the faith -- what are you going to do so that the Crafton Heights Church does not end up like Ahimaaz -- so that at a time when you or your community most need to know the truth, when you are in the greatest need of being ably to rely upon the message, you are not standing off on the sidelines, out of breath, tired, and irrelevant?

You can be awake. You can have your lamps lit, be aware and on the look-out. And that is no easy task, especially in matters of the spirit. In his memoir, *Living Faith*, President Jimmy Carter talks of visiting an Amish

community. As they gathered for worship, he asked his host who would be delivering the message, and was told “We don’t know”. The host went on to explain that on the table in the front of the room was a stack of hymnals; at the beginning of worship each man would go up and select a book. Whoever got the book with the red ribbon in it was the preacher for the day. Carter said, “Well, how do you know when to be ready?” His host replied, “In my experience, it is always a good idea to be prepared!”

We have a tendency to think that things are "good enough", and so we leave them be. We get comfortable in our own little lives. A part of being awake, I would suggest, is to try new edges in your life. Where is your faith old and comfortable and maybe even a little bit boring? And what could you do to shake that up a bit? Is it time for you to step forward and participate in a new ministry? To join with some friends in a prayer circle, or volunteer at the Open Door, or ask a friend to recommend a book or a mission experience that could be transformative?

When Christ calls us to be awake, to be alert, I think that it means to avoid becoming so well-rested, so satisfied with where we are that we aren't able to grow any more. I'm not saying that everything new is great -- but will you open yourself up in one way or another to keep growing?

The second thing that Christ mentions is to be ready for action. To have our collective loins girded up.

As a congregation, that's not so hard. Are our programs ready to nurture and disciple children and young people? Are the Deacons in place and trained to respond to the needs of the congregation and tuned in to the opportunities in Allegheny County and around the world? If I am is doing my job, this church ought to be ready, or moving

towards readiness -- at least in the way we run our programs.

But what about our private lives?

Are you ready? Do you know the truth for your life that is contained in scripture? Are you studying the Bible in public - with a class or small group -- and in private - on your own at home? Because if you don't know it, you can't share it. You can't love it. You can't teach it. You can't lean on it. I'm not suggesting that you need to be a Seminary professor. But I am suggesting that a part of readiness includes knowing what the Master wants us to be like.

Are you able to "be real" with another person? Is there a place in your world for you to be honest in your hopes and dreams, in your doubts and fears? That's a part of being ready too - being able to address the uncomfortable areas in our life.

When I read through this parable in Luke, I found myself cheering for you, rooting you on. I saw you -- I want to see you -- in the faces of the watchful servants who are awake and ready when the master comes.

Partly, I want this for your sake. I want to see the joy on your faces when you share in the celebration that the master brings home with him. I want you to celebrate the kingdom the way that your Creator has invited you to.

But mostly, I want this for the sake of the people who aren't in the room right now. People who don't know the Lord yet, but who, as a result of the ministry that we are sharing, will come to know the Lord. People who form the community around the church. I don't know most of those folks at all. Yet I know that these people are people with questions. People want to know what's important. What is

worth dying for? What is life about? Who can I trust? What should I do? What do I need to do to be loved?

And you will be here. And too often, do you know what the Christian church looks like? Too many churches in Allegheny County have stood here like Ahimaaz -- panting, confused, and irrelevant. And the people in this community – children and adults – who have questions about love, life, values, and priorities will get the answers from someone. At some point, at least some of them will cross paths with you. If you help them find answers, they will be blessed. And if they don't, they'll wander away.

You ought to know that I love being your pastor. This is a great place to be, beloved. But let us never forget that we are not called to be here simply to enjoy each other's company on pleasant Sunday mornings... we are entrusted with a message of hope and reconciliation and power and joy... a message that is ours, not to keep, but to share – again and again and again. When the time for sharing it comes, may we be found to be alert and prepared! Thanks be to God, Amen.