Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we continue a sermon series titled, “So You Can Know For Sure.” It is a study through the Gospel of Luke.

The text we are studying today is ▶ Luke 4:31-44. From this text, we are going to learn some best practices for maintaining priorities while living incredibly busy, stressful, draining lives.

With so many things clamoring for our attention, how do we make sure we do the most important things?

How do we navigate the craziness of life with intentionality so that we keep first things first?

Let me illustrate why this is so important.

[Roll out cart.]

Let this empty container represent your life, ready to be filled with things you choose to do. The many things to do are divided into three categories.

First, there are many small things to be done, represented by these marbles.

[Hold up marble.]

These are the least important things. They are not life-changing activities, but they often clamor the loudest for our attention. They always seem to be in your face.

Then, there are the medium-sized things, represented by the golf balls.

[Hold up golf ball.]

There are not as many of these. They represent really good things to do. But they are not the top priorities in life. These often carry a sense of urgency.

Finally, there are the big things, represented by the baseballs.

[Hold up baseball.]

These are the most important things in life. There are comparatively few of these. And they rarely scream for our attention. They are easy to put off. And they often don't lend themselves well to a tidy to-do list.

The path of least resistance is to do the urgent things first—the squeaky wheels, the things that are pressing.

[Put in marbles then golf balls.]

It can feel good. It can provide a sense of productivity because we can check off a lot of things on our to-do list. We can easily rationalize that we'll get around to the more important things once we've cleared the way.

The risk here is we never get around to the big things. We have filled our time with lesser things.

Let's start over. We don't get a do-over in life, but we do in this illustration.

[Replace containers.]

The better approach is to prioritize the big things. First things first. And then fit in the smaller stuff as we are able.

[Put in baseballs, then golf balls, then marbles.]

This way, the big things get done.

But this does leave some things of lesser importance undone, including some really good things. The choice to do something always carries with it the choice not to do other things.

This is not news to you. You get the idea.

But the question is: How do you ascertain what the big things are on a day-to-day basis? How do you know what God wants you to do? When there are so many good things that seem important, how do you discern when to say yes and when to say no?

[Put cart away.]

Near the end of his life on earth, Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father. As recorded in ▶ John 17:4, he prays,

> ESV John 17:4 “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.”

This is a remarkable statement. Jesus accomplished all the work the Father had given him to do. All the big things. Can there be a life better spent than that?

Clearly, there was a lot of work that Jesus did *not* do. He did not heal all the sick everywhere. He did not restore sight to all the blind on earth. He

did not right every wrong. He had to say no to many good things to make sure to pursue his highest priorities.

You may be thinking, “Well Bob, Jesus had a slight advantage. He is God.”

True. But that doesn’t mean it was easy for him. Yes, Jesus is fully God. But he is also fully human. And in his humanness, he felt all the pressures and stressors that we do. He needed the wisdom of his Father to make wise choices.

First let’s consider how hectic and demanding Jesus’s life was. In the immediately preceding context, we learned last week that Jesus had just been rejected in his hometown of Nazareth and barely survives an assassination attempt.

We often think that Jesus is utterly unaffected by such rejection and threats. But in his humanness, I think he felt much that same way that we would have felt.

Fresh off the assassination attempt, Jesus returns to Capernaum. ▶ Luke 4:31 explains,

> ESV Luke 4:31 And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath,

Good teaching is hard work. Especially when the audience is not sure what they think of you. And especially when the material being taught is important and controversial.

Good teachers make it look easy, but it’s not.

- It takes preparation in advance.
- It takes focus on objectives.
- It takes concentration in the moment.

- It takes clarity of communication.
- It takes creativity in delivery.
- It takes sensitivity and adaptation to the audience.
- It takes anticipation of questions.

And when you've been teaching for an extended period of time, you're gassed. Like any good teacher, Jesus feels that.

There are certainly rewards for good teaching. ▶ Verse 32 explains,

> ESV Luke 4:32 and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.

And any teacher knows that teaching can have unexpected interruptions that make it even more difficult. ▶ Verses 33 and 34 present an interruption.

> ESV Luke 4:33 And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice,
>
> ▶ ESV Luke 4:34 "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God."

If you're a teacher, you've had interruptions. But you have probably never had a demonic heckler. Not like this.

Jesus does not put him in a time out; he casts him out. ▶ Verse 35 says,

> ESV Luke 4:35 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" . . .

▶ ESV Luke 4:35 . . . And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.

As you can imagine, this creates quite a stir. ▶ Verses 36 and 37 say,

ESV Luke 4:36 And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!"

▶ ESV Luke 4:37 And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

At the end of the day, Jesus goes home. Only he has no home, and his day has not ended. He goes to the home of one of his newly recruited rookie disciples, Simon Peter. ▶ Verse 38 says,

ESV Luke 4:38 And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. . . .

We don't know what Jesus is thinking at this point. But it would be perfectly understandable if, after a full day, he is looking forward to a little bread, a little wine, and a little rest.

No sooner does Jesus walk in the door than he faces more challenges. The rest of ▶ verse 38 explains,

ESV Luke 4:38 . . . Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf.

Ever come home after a full day, looking forward to some relief from all the stressors, only to be greeted with yet another problem only you can solve?

Jesus gets to work. ▶ Verse 39 records,

> ESV Luke 4:39 And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

Problem solved. Finally, as the sun sets, after a long day of serving, Jesus gets to be served by Peter's mother-in-law.

But suddenly there is a knock on the door. And behind the door is a line of people who have heard that Jesus has been healing people and is staying at Peter's house. ▶ Verse 40 describes the scene.

> ESV Luke 4:40 Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, . . .

> ▶ ESV Luke 4:40 . . . and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

Jesus heals people well into the night. And many of these are not your run-of-the-mill sick people; many are demon-possessed. ▶ Verse 41 explains,

> ESV Luke 4:41 And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" . . .

> ▶ ESV Luke 4:41 . . . But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

It is easy to read right past this and assume this kind of work—healing and casting out demons—is no big deal for Jesus. But I suspect it's exhausting.

In Luke 8, there is an account of a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years. She came up behind Jesus in a crowd and touched the fringe of his garment and was healed. In ▶ Luke 8:46, Jesus says,

> ESV Luke 8:46 . . . “Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me.”

The suggestion is that healing is draining. I realize this brings up theological questions. Jesus is God. God is omnipotent. So, how could healing be draining to an infinitely powerful God?

It is a mystery.

In becoming fully man, Jesus somehow took on human limitations, temporarily suspending his prerogatives as God. Exactly how and when these limitations come into play is not entirely clear. But we see evidence of such limitations in his encounter with the woman who touched him. Jesus does not seem to know it was her who touched him. How can this be if God is omniscient? It is because of the mysterious limitations of his humanness.

Welcome to the club of finite people trying to figure out an infinite God.

My point is: I think healing and casting out demons is draining for Jesus.

By the way, back in ▶ verse 41, this is the second time in our text where Jesus does not allow the demons to speak. The reason given is because they know that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

And this raises a question for us: Why would it be a problem for demons to say that Jesus is the Christ? Wouldn’t that be a good thing? Wouldn’t that authenticate Jesus’ teaching?

Although we are not given a full explanation, I suspect this is Jesus' way of protecting his time and his priorities. He does not want to be overwhelmed with people wanting to be healed or exorcized. These are good things to do, but not the most important things. They are not his priority. Preaching the gospel is his priority.

Which raises a question. How does Jesus maintain his priorities? In the flurry of demands on his time, how does he get and keep his bearings? ▶ Verse 42 holds a key. It says,

> ESV Luke 4:42 And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. . . .

The parallel account in the gospel of Mark adds that Jesus departed in the wee hours of the morning before sun-up so he could be alone with his heavenly Father to pray.

This is not unusual. Jesus pursued a regular rhythm of solitude and prayer amid ministry demands. ▶ Luke 5:16 tells us,

> NIRV Luke 5:16 . . . Jesus often went away to be by himself and pray.

I believe it is in these times of solitude and prayer that Jesus is able to gain strength, to recalibrate, and to refocus on the priorities given by the Father.

But maintaining these times is hard because the demands are relentless. ▶ Verse 42 says,

> ESV Luke 4:42 . . . And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them,

We know from Mark's account that the people who track down Jesus include Peter and other disciples. They say, "everyone is looking for you" (Mark 1:37). They want to reel Jesus back into town and keep him there, where he can do more good things. There are more people to heal. More demons to cast out.

But Jesus says no. ▶ Verses 43 records,

> ESV Luke 4:43 but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."

The priority of Jesus is preaching. And that's what he pursues. He says, "I was sent for this purpose." It is as if he is replaying what he was just reminded of in his time alone with the Father—the one who sent him. "I was sent for this purpose."

Think of how difficult it would have been to decide to leave people in Capernaum unhealed for the sake of preaching elsewhere.

We know that Jesus is compassionate. We know that Jesus has a heart to serve. We know that Jesus' love for people runs so deep that he is willing to die that they might live.

So, how could he leave these poor people behind in Capernaum?

There would have been an internal tug from wanting to help people.

And there would also have been an external tug. People are not going to understand. Indeed, this decision wouldn't play well today in our culture. If I could cure someone of a disease, but chose not to so I could preach instead, that might make the news, but not in a good way. People would

say, “And that’s the reason I want nothing to do with you Christian hypocrites.”

Going back to Capernaum to heal more people would have been the popular choice; everybody would love him.

It would have been the philanthropic choice; it’s good to heal people.

It would have been the expedient choice; the people are right there.

It would have been the considerate choice; Simon’s family wouldn’t have to disperse the crowd.

It would have been the gratifying choice; it feels good to be needed and wanted.

It would have been the obvious choice; nobody is clamoring for more preaching.

But Jesus’ priorities transcend worldly priorities. Jesus is seeking the well-being of people for eternity, not just for this life only. His priority is to save people from hell, not just from leprosy.

And to that end, he continues to preach. ▶ Verse 44 says,

> ESV Luke 4:44 And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

Judea is not close to Capernaum. It is a journey of several days to the south.

A key lesson to be learned from Jesus lies back in ▶ verse 42, where it says,

> ESV Luke 4:42 And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. . . .

In the busyness of life, Jesus retreats so that he can commune with his Father, to listen again to what the Father wants him to do, to be strengthened in his resolve, and to be empowered to fulfill the purpose for which he was sent.

Here's the big idea I draw from the example of Jesus: ▶ Retreat to advance. Get alone with God before you get on with life. Stop to consult his compass and map before continuing your journey.

Call the retreats whatever you want. Quiet times. Devotionals. Spiritual disciplines. But they are indispensable to living for the purposes God has you here.

Retreat to advance.

It is counterintuitive. It is countercultural. The world will not applaud retreat. Neither will it criticize the failure to retreat. It is too busy with all the marbles.

But as believers, if we want to advance the God-given purposes for our lives, if we want to say before God, "I accomplished the work you gave me to do," then we must retreat regularly, as Jesus did. If Jesus needed it, how much more do we?

Last Tuesday at 3:30AM I was in the emergency room with my 87-year-old mother. I had been with her the night before as she was feeling sick and weak from an infection for which she had just started some medication. Turns out the infection went septic, prompting a 911 call and a trip to the ER and hospitalization.

Before all this, I was already feeling drained from the week before, in which I had a couple of extra speaking engagements for the conference we hosted here. As I get older, recovery time gets longer.

While at the hospital, when it became clear that mom was going to be there for days not hours, I began thinking about how the rest of the week was going to play out. The week was busier than average, while my energy level was lower than average.

I felt overwhelmed. How am I going to navigate the week? Mom needs someone to be with her enough to advocate and communicate with medical personnel on her behalf, preferably a medical power of attorney, which pretty much narrows the field to me and Cathy. We both work full time at demanding jobs.

My mind was pinballing and bleary.

So, I retreated. Only I didn't go to a desolate place. I stayed put. Right there in the hospital room. I had my regular devotional time in which I read Scripture, reflected on it, applied it, prayed, and listened.

My reading plan took me to ▶ 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, where Paul says,

> CSB17 2 Corinthians 1:8 . . . We were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life itself. ▶ 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.

I felt the familiar, palpable presence of my loving God. I don't feel it all the time, but when I do, it is usually during one of my regular retreats. He was speaking to me through his word, telling me that I am not alone in feeling overwhelmed, and inviting me to trust in him and not in myself.

I thanked him for his presence and his word to me. And I prayed for wisdom, asking God to show me the things he wanted me to do and the things I should cancel or leave undone. Then I met with Cathy. We roughed out a plan.

I fired off some emails cancelling some groups I lead, and begging off my participation in some other meetings, all the while fighting back voices telling me, “You’re such a flake. You should be strong enough to do all of it. Suck it up and get it done.”

I kept preaching on the to-do list because I figured I could squeeze in some sermon prep at the hospital.

And throughout the week, I kept retreating, even though it felt like I had no time for it.

Wednesday morning, my reading plan took me to ▶ Psalm 6, where verse 9 says,

> CSB17 Psalm 6:9 The LORD has heard my plea for help; the LORD accepts my prayer.

I wrote it in my journal, along with the principle I drew from it: The Lord is attentive to my pleas. I needed the reminder in order to advance.

Thursday morning, my reading plan took me to ▶ 2 Corinthians 5, where verse 15 says,

> CSB17 2 Corinthians 5:15 And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised.

I wrote it in my journal, along with the principle I drew from it: Live not for yourself but for the Lord. I needed the reminder in order to advance.

On that day, an infectious diseases doctor came in to see mom. I was reminded of my friend, Felipe Gutierrez, an ID doc who used to attend Moon Valley but now practices in Washington state. I had been meaning to contact Felipe. In fact, contacting him had been on my to-do list for months. And just a week or two earlier, Cathy had said to me out of the blue, "You should contact Felipe." But I had put it off.

After talking with the ID doc about my mom, and as he was about to leave, I asked one last question, putting it out there as a kind of fleece. "Do you know Felipe Gutierrez?"

His face brightened, and he said, "Yes, great guy. Smart. I trained under him." In that moment, I knew I was supposed to contact Felipe.

But I pushed back.

I thought "This does not look like something big. I don't have time for this right now. What if this turns into a long, deep conversation for which I have no bandwidth? Maybe later, after things settle down."

And then I remembered what I had just read that day and two days before. Live for God, not yourself. Trust in God, not yourself.

So, I contacted Felipe.

From my point of view, there was nothing remarkable about our brief conversation. I don't know why I was prompted to contact him. But God knows. And he's in charge.

Friday morning, my reading plan took me to ▶ Psalm 8, where verse 3 and 4 say,

> CSB17 Psalm 8:3 When I observe your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you set in place, ▶ 4 what is a human being that you remember him, a son of man that you look after him?

I wrote them in my journal, along with the principle I drew from it: The Creator of the universe looks after me. I needed the reminder in order to advance.

And through all the retreating, God was strengthening me, guiding me, and even providing me with sermon material I could not have gathered on my own.

In all this, God gets the glory. I'm just a guy who retreats.

Which brings us back to the big idea: ▶ Retreat to advance.

Let's pray.

Lord, give us the wisdom and strength to regularly retreat from our busyness to discover and advance your purposes for our lives. Amen.