

*Living the Dream: Show Up*  
Jeremiah 1:4-10

We're going to spend today and the next three weeks thinking together about a rule of life. The idea of a 'rule of life' comes out of monastic life—those ancient communities where people practiced faith in the company of others. Those communities have been around since the early days of Christianity, well over a thousand years. But monastic communities still exist. They're not exactly churches; they're places where people go to live—sometimes for the rest of their life, or sometimes for a season—a month or two or three; sometimes just for a few days, to clear their heads and get their lives back on track. I've stayed in a community like that just once. At a turning point in my life, when my mind had to be clear so that I could hear what I was supposed to do next, I went to a monastery and lived in their rule of life for eight days of silence and prayer and stillness.

It has always been true that no matter how good our human intentions are about holding on to a life that is grounded and clear and steadfast, life out here in the world throws us off those intentions. We put our best self down for just for a minute—so that we can get something done, or to make a point to that one person who is so darn annoying—and then we can't quite find the thread that will lead us back. I get a glimpse of a vision that promises to bring the random pieces of my life into some beautiful and purposeful design, and then the picture gets obscured by a dozen things I have to get done first. I lose my way; and I do it pretty much every day.

What monastic communities offer to the people who come to stay there is a rhythm that clears the way for single-mindedness, whole-heartedness. It's not an easier life—monastic days are mostly full of disciplined work—but it's a simpler, less distracted life. There are just a few things to focus on, over and over again. There's a clarity that comes with concentrating your attention that way, naming the focus that will call you back every time your attention wanders away. That's what a 'rule of life' is. In our regular, every-day lives, outside the monastery, a rule of life is a simple pattern that you can return to again and again, a re-set that will draw you back into the person you know you want to be.

I suppose a rule of life is a little like a diet, or an exercise routine. If I know that I can lose a few pounds by reducing carbs, or keep my body functional by working out five days a week, I'll go back to those routines (maybe) every time I feel the consequences of having wandered away. It's part of how I live feeling better about myself, being care-full for this one body I've been given.

But here's how a rule of life is *not* like a diet. A rule of life attaches me to something bigger than feeling good about myself, or even following some grand idea of my personal destiny. A rule of life says first: I am a person of faith. People of faith are people who have attached themselves to a vision that is not our own. People of faith live with a persistent sense that there is something at work in our lives and in the world that is more important than our plans and personal goals. People of faith know that however good and generous and just we aim for our lives to be, and long for the world to be, there is a Great Love that's *beyond* us, an ideal we can glimpse but

never capture fully. People of faith know that the intention that will make everything right finally is not our vision, but God's.

A rule of life is the simple thing we do every day, every moment we are conscious, to fasten ourselves to God's dream for us and for the world.

I long for that. Don't you?

There are many rules of life that are valuable; you could make one up for yourself. In these four weeks, I want to invite you to practice one that I am finding these days to have particular power. It was put together by Elaine Heath. Elaine is a former seminary professor and Dean of Duke Divinity School. She's developed some extraordinarily innovative forms of church in different places around the country. Somehow, our life at LAUMC and Elaine's life in North Carolina have converged over the last couple of years. She has become a good friend to me; she's working with Dirk on his doctoral thesis; she's one of our partners in the Changemaker work.

Elaine calls this rule of life a *contemplative stance*, which is to say, a posture. A position we can take daily to live as people who want to be part of God's dream for a creation in which every life can flourish. I love the idea of calling a rule of life a *contemplative stance*. The word 'contemplative' suggests something deep and thoughtful, connected to a larger, mysterious source of wisdom. A 'stance' sounds to me like something ready for action, for movement. That's how I want to live: leaning forward toward movement, rooted in something sacred beneath my feet.

This contemplative stance has four parts, four steps that I hope you'll have fixed in your mind by the time we finish this series:

- *Show up*
- *Pay attention*
- *Cooperate with God*
- *Release the outcome*

As we dig into this contemplative stance, we're going to keep talking about the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived 2500 years ago, in the Jewish Exile to Babylon. It was a time just as confusing as ours is. There were a hundred things happening in the world and in Jeremiah's life that made it hard for him to track whatever it was that God wanted for him, or even what he wanted for himself. He too had to decipher signals that were sometimes contradictory. He too lived in a world where there was so much suffering, that it was hard to tell whether God was punishing the earth or urging it toward resilience. For Jeremiah, and for us, a life of faith could be accomplished only one day at a time. Every moment of wandering away was a bidding—to re-center, to resume his stance, to listen again for the God who is always just beyond our reach.

The first movement in this stance is *Show up*. That's it: show up. It sounds simple, doesn't it? But so often we don't show up fully to our lives, or to the people around us.

Sometimes we don't show up because we're not confident we're up to whatever this situation might ask of us. That was Jeremiah's first response when God called him to speak: 'I don't know how to do this, God. I'm only a child.' I'm too young, or too old; the time isn't right; I have no experience; I don't know enough yet. *I am here, but can I review my options first?*

Sometimes we don't show up because we don't fully respect the people around us or the circumstances we find ourselves in. We hold part of ourselves back—for cynicism, or judgment, or in case something more interesting draws our attention.

Sometimes it's because we are honestly afraid. We have shown up before and found ourselves uninvited, marginalized, reduced to silence. To show up again, now, requires more vulnerability than I'm comfortable risking. And so I leave myself room to retreat.

*Show up*, this rule of life says. Leave all your old stuff aside, so that you can pay attention to what's in front of you right now. Because only when you are fully present are you open and available to whatever possibility this moment holds.

I'm thinking about those Olympic athletes who are in Tokyo right now. I watched a little bit of the gymnastics trials, and I was struck again by what is true every time they go out there to do their routines: that *anything* can happen. No matter how many hours they have practiced, no matter how excellent they are at their sport, every time they get out there on rings or the vault or a floor mat, something can go wrong. Every routine takes absolute concentration, full presence.

In the final day of Olympic trials, Simone Biles missed a landing, fell off the balance beam, made mistakes on the uneven bars. Sam Mikulak, who has been on the men's Olympic team twice before, slid right off the pommel horse at a critical moment. He barely made the last spot on this year's team. It happens to even the best athletes in the world.

And still... They go out there, again and again, and put their whole selves—body, mind, effort, reputation—into doing something that can *never* be mastered. *That's* showing up.

That's the kind of single focus I'll probably never have, not even for my faith. But I can practice. I can call myself back to focus every time my often-wandering mind and remarkably persistent self-centeredness keep my head lowered, my eyes focused on small things. Like athletes want a medal or a win, I want to see the dream that God has for a world that flourishes. I want to join that dream, make it my dream too. Because *that's* the dream that will give my life the meaning and purpose I long for it to have.

*Show up*  
*Pay attention*  
*Cooperate with God*  
*Release the outcome.*

But first: just show up.

