

Are You Ready?

Rev. Thomas Orquiza-Renardo

Our gospel reading this morning was a little short, but still it was cram-packed with a lot of information. So let's go back and look at this again. There's a number of things going on in the passage.

First, Jesus is telling us, "Do not be afraid." I love this phrase in the Bible. It's a phrase to catch your attention. Generally, what it means is God is about to do something. Something is about to happen. If we go back to 2 Kings 4, we'll find there the story of a distressed Shunammite woman comes to Elisha pleading for his help. Elisha's first words to her are, "Do not be afraid." To make a long story short, Elisha prophesied by the power of God that she would be freed from a debt that would have cost the woman her son, and it miraculously came to pass. This same woman's son later died and Elisha brought him back to life.

Another example comes from an encounter with another woman. This is in 1 Kings 17. God tells the prophet Elijah (not to be confused with Elisha) to go and stay with a widow in Zarephath whom God has commanded to offer food and lodging for the prophet. Elijah comes upon here as she is out collecting sticks so she might start a fire and prepare the last of her bread.

It's important to note there's a drought in the land going on at this time. There's a scarcity of food. So when I say she was going to prepare the last of her bread, she really thought this was going to be the last meal she and her son were going to eat before they starved to death. And she told Elijah as much.

I'm sure you can guess at this point what Elijah's response was. "Do not be afraid," and then Elijah prophesied a miraculous multiplication of the flour she had left. A multiplication that would last until the end of the drought. God acted.

So when we hear Jesus saying those words in scripture, "Do not be afraid," it means be ready. God is about to do something.

Turning back to Luke, Jesus continues, "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." In those words, right there, it's revealed to us, God wants to give us the kingdom. Think on that. God, who has created all of creation, who is the Almighty, who is the all-encompassing, in everything and works through everything, wants to give us the keys to the kingdom.

Then Jesus goes on, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out..." I'm ok with the idea of making a purse, or in my case a wallet that doesn't wear out... But that whole part about selling my possessions? I don't know. I kinda like the way we have the parsonage furnished with all our possessions. I don't wanna give that up.

The idea Jesus is getting after though, comes in his next words. "... an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus is saying, we need to have our priorities straight.

Jesus goes on, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit...” Again, there’s that instruction to *be ready*. “...be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.”

We seem to have heard this in another place. In another gospel or parable perhaps. It’s this idea of, ‘be ready, for we don’t know when the master is coming back.’ If we look at Matthew 24 we’ll find read there of Jesus telling his disciples about all the things that will happen in the end times. He says there will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be false prophets who come in Jesus’ name, but we are not to be led astray. Nation will rise up against nation. There will be earthquakes and birth pangs. You will be handed over and brutalized because of my name. Lawlessness will increase and love will grow cold. These are signs of the end will come. Even with Jesus’ warning of all of this, we are commanded to be prepared. We do not know when the master is returning.

Now, That’s an eschatological, end times idea. Something we normally think of as being in the back of the Bible in the *The Revelation to John*. Still, the importance of being prepared cannot be stated enough.

There’re a few things we need to know about that. One, is these things were being said in a time of urgency. What was happening in that time was Roman occupation. Rome came in, conquered Israel, or at this point in time, Judah, and took charge of the land. Israel still had its own government, because it was not a Roman practice to assimilate and destroy different cultures like Assyria did. What Rome did was take over a land, claim it for Caesar as King, place vassals and governors over the resident people, force the conquered culture to pay taxes, and allow them to keep their religion.

If you think about that, it made perfect sense. Rome was not one to say there’s no room for your god. Rome itself had dozens of gods. They had major gods like Jupiter (Zeus), Neptune (Poseidon), Pluto (Hades); minor gods like Bacchus, Cupid, Faunus. They clearly believed in the existence of multiple gods, so they were ok with a conquered culture having its own gods. The Jewish people worshiping Yahweh was of little consequence to them.

Even with Roman acceptance of Jewish culture, Judah railed against having to pay taxes to Caesar. It was an insult. In Jewish eyes, God was their true king, not this Caesar. This led to a constant volatile reality of Rome looming over Judah, capable of crushing the people at any moment.

The urgency in this situation comes from the belief that God was going to send the Messiah. In most people’s view this was a military leader, perhaps a prophet-general, who would free Judah from Roman rule, restoring all of Israel, and reign on David’s thrown forever. So the urgency is all wrapped up in the messianic theology that at any moment, they didn’t know when, God was going to act. The urgency was in the need to be ready to stand with the Messiah, as God, with all God’s power and might, takes final control of everything.

Jesus speaks about this need to be ready in terms of the bridegroom returning from the wedding banquet. Culturally, the groom would go to the bride’s house, they’d be married, a celebration

would ensue, then the groom would bring the bride back to his home. We should take note, the scripture is specifically talking about staying awake and alert during the night and keeping your lamps lit. Scripture speaks about being dressed in the right way. For example, having your clothes girded up, fastened or tied up in your cincture or belt so that your robes don't get in the way of your legs. In other words, be ready to move, possibly run.

It's an idea we see in the Passover as well. God told the Hebrew in slavery to prepare the unleavened bread and be ready to leave, staff in hand, while they ate. The angel was coming that night to bring God's final catastrophic victory over Egypt. Be ready, cause in the morning Pharaoh will finally let you go.

It's a repeating instruction. Be ready. In the case of the gospel lessons, it's even more important cause all we know is the master with his new bride is coming. What we don't know is when. And being caught unprepared will not be good.

Today our wedding celebrations are a little different. While our celebrations with newly weds more times than not go late into the night, we go home at the end, usually before dawn. And if not home, then we go back to the hotel. In Jesus' day, when he's teaching these things to his disciples, wedding celebrations also went well into the night. However, night was a dangerous time to travel so it was customary to remain with the host till morning. Hence, Jesus' warning about the unexpected hour. Why would the bridegroom be returning with his bride at an unsafe time?

But with God, with Jesus, always be on the lookout. It goes to this idea of what we understand as being ready. What is it to be ready? What is it to honor God? What is it to always be in that mindset of being vigilant for God, ready at any moment for the Messiah Jesus' return?

This is where we get into a little confusion as to what that means. Somewhere along the line we were pulled into this idea of blessings and curses. If you're a righteous person, you'll be blessed. God will give you wealth. God will give you all kinds of goodness in your life. If you're not a righteous person, you're cursed. Your life will be full of hardship and famine and disease, and poverty. Somewhere along the line people bought into this theology and it caused the people to separate; to form classes. Those who thought they were holy were doing all these "great" things, giving long public prayers, wearing fine clothes, offering the right kinds of sacrifices, performing the right rituals.

But then Isaiah comes along and turns that idea up-side-down. Isaiah notices in his culture someone is being left out. It could be a cause for ruin. So Isaiah, receiving a message from God, tells his people, 'I don't want your offerings anymore. How do you honor God? Let me tell you this. It's not by your incense burning. It's not by your goats and your rams and your bulls, and your sheep, and your lambs. It's not by your wheat and grain offering or the rituals you perform. It's not by your holy festivals or the prayers that you speak. But, if you love your neighbor, if you take care of the oppressed, if you champion the cause of widow and the orphan, if you do justice and love kindness, this is what the Lord delights in.'

These days, there's a number of things going on in our society. Some of them come from what's called the prosperity gospel; an interpretation of the scripture centered on the idea if you

love Jesus enough, you'll be blessed with wealth. If you love Jesus enough, and share the gospel enough, and have enough faith, then God will bless you... and you, too, can have a billionaire's mansion on a hill. You too, can drive a Porsche and a Hummer. You too, will never ever have to worry about debt again. Now just put your hand on the television screen and pray with me. Then send your check to such and such an address.

Do you think that works? What's missing there?

Love is missing. Compassion is missing. Justice is missing. Kindness is missing.

In all of the mass shootings that have happened, and continue to happen, do you think it's thoughts and prayers alone that lead to change? There's something missing there. God even said in scripture, 'I will not accept your prayers. I will not accept your offerings. I will not accept your sacrifices. They are not what I delight in.' Putting forth a front of faithfulness in pious rituals, prayers, and shallow righteousness is not how we are ready.

So how are we ready? Maybe we can shed a little light on this question with the words of Pope Francis. Pope Francis once said, "You pray for the hungry, then you feed them. This is how prayer works." This is how we make ourselves ready. If we want our prayers to have power behind them, then we need to follow them up with action. Action must follow prayer if we are to have any effect on the world. This morning quote in the bulletin speaks to this also. Lewis Cass said, "People may doubt what you say, but they believe what you do."

There's a number of churches out there, a number of preachers who get up in their pulpit every Sunday and they say, 'Jesus loves you. Come and join in this worship. Come and be blessed. Come and know the Spirit of God. This church is here and open for all the children of God.' But then those very same churches speak out against helping those in poverty, speak against welcoming those who are other. The very people who need the love of Jesus are the people being left out. What you end up with is an action message of exile and exclusion drowning out the verbal message of love and hope.

It's the whole idea of practicing what we preach. People will often listen to what we do over what we say. So what do we do? How do we work? How do we show the love of God? How are we ready?

Well, for one, stop making promises or speaking on things that are not carried through by action. As it's been said, "The best sermon you can give is the live you live." That's an idea I heard some years back and I've tried to carry it through. Like I said last week, I could stand up here and preach all day. But it's not gonna mean anything if my actions do back up the love I speak of. On the door coming into the church there's two signs. One says, "All are welcome here," and the other says, "Open hearts, open minds, open doors." But those sentiments are meaningless if the church does not follow through.

So how do we prepare? we follow through. How do we store up treasure for ourselves in heaven? We create treasure in relationship. We create treasure through love and compassion, through spreading hope and joy, through saying our thoughts and prayers are with you and then acting on those thoughts and prayers.

How are we prepared and how are we ready? We reverse roles. In the gospel imagery the master is comes home at the unexpected hour. Those servants who are ready and waiting to open that door, who are ready to go when the master says go, are rewarded. It's a reward where the servants trade places with the master. The servants get to sit at the table while the master prepares the meal.

This is not something that normally happens in a servant master relationship. Yet Jesus gives this image of reversal, this idea that the master serves us. It's also an idea Jesus' talked about on multiple occasions. It's the idea of the first shall be last and the last shall be first. You who want to be first, you who want to lead must humble yourselves and be last. It's a strange idea, but it comes through in servant-leadership.

We are in a place where we can give. We have resources. We have money, granted not a whole lot, but there is a blessing there. We have ways in which we can serve community. We need to change our roles. Instead of a gospel of prosperity, it becomes a gospel of servant-leadership. Instead of a gospel of blessings and curses, it becomes a gospel of abundance, a gospel of sharing the blessing.

As we ponder that let me give you a few examples of how that's happening in the world. We hear a lot about the negative things going on, but we often don't hear about the positives. It's a perpetual news real of these bad things are happening in the world, these groups are being discriminated against, poverty is increasing, homelessness is increasing, gun violence is increasing. But what about those things that are positive? What are people doing to make change? What are the ways people are serving in leadership by changing the roles?

One of the ways that happening is a rubber duck derby. This week, Chicago did their Rubber Duck Derby, where they released thousands of rubber duckies in the Chicago River. The rubber ducks "raced" down the river to see who would be the winner, and who would get the bragging rights for the rest of the year. Where does the humanity and compassion come in to this event? It comes in with the money it raises for Illinois Special Olympics, a program that allows persons with developmental disabilities compete, and realize they are not helpless. Helps them realize, yes, their struggle is real, but they are still able to achieve and have pride in their abilities. Last year, the Rubber Duck Derby raised over \$400,000.

Another thing that's happening in the world; Ruben Martinez in El Paso, Texas, a child, put forward this challenge. He challenged all the people in the El Paso community to do 22 acts of kindness; one good deed per victim of gun violence in the El Paso mass shooting. A child lifted out of the ashes a way in which God's people in God's love can take tragedy and do something good though it. And I don't mean doing something good because of it or with it, but through it; doing something to begin to bring healing.

One more ministry to celebrate; in Nigeria there is a mother whose daughter has congenital heart issues. In Nigeria there is a cultural stigma about disabilities. The belief is, if you have disabilities you are a victim of witchcraft or other supernatural activity or it could be a sign you're practicing in the taboo yourself. So, if you have a disability, you don't want to tell anybody. If people find out, you could be labelled as cursed or as a witch. What this mother is doing, is starting

the IREDE Project. She is out there being vocal about her daughter's disability, working to spread the value of science backed truth over and against the danger of superstition. She is working to change the culture and the way people understand how the human body works. In so doing she's working to change the way people relate to those whom happen to have disabilities. She is teaching her fellow Nigerians that having a disability is not something to be ashamed of. She is bringing normalcy back to human life, and dignity back to those who are oppressed, silenced, and held down for something that is a part of who they are.

How are we ready? Not by sacrifice. Not by burnt offerings or blood offerings. No. But there was a letter of hope in Isaiah. Perhaps you heard it. After the whole condemnation; God saying I will not hear your prayers, I will not accept your offerings. They are detestable to me... God said this. "...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing to be obedient, you shall eat the good of the land..." God is saying in this moment, all is not lost. God can purify you, redeem you, and make you whole again.

How are we ready? We do justice. We champion the cause of the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan. How are we ready? We are ready with and through Jesus Christ. We are ready when we welcome Spirit to fill us, so we would show that same compassion that was shown to us. How are we ready? We follow the example of those who do good in the world. We work to change the culture. We work to be the compassionate people of God looking for that day when Jesus comes back, looking to that unexpected hour when the master returns, but not forgetting the hour that we are in. We work to be intentional to not forsake the people, community, and world around us.

As we go from this place. Let us be the children of God. Let us be the people empowered by the Holy Spirit. Let us be the servants at the door, ready to answer the master, not just at the unexpected hour when the master returns, but right here, right now, in this time. Because while this passage in Luke looks to end times, Jesus is knocking now. Jesus is saying, 'Go now. Love my people. Spread my hope. Share my good news that for you, the kingdom of God is near.'

In Jesus holy name. Amen.