

## **“Be Ready”**

### **Matthew 24:36-44**

Bishop Elizabeth Eaton recently shared this story from her time as a pastor in our synod... He was a young man in his early 20s. He had cancer. His mother and stepfather cared for him to the point of weariness. The family was unchurched, but a friend was a member of our parish and asked if I could visit them. That's how I came to walk with them in the last months. There were hospitalizations and finally palliative care. The young man endured with stoic courage. His mother and stepfather never wavered in their care. Friends supported the family by bringing meals and sometimes just sitting in silence with them. At last, the call I knew was coming came. The young man had died.

I drove to the farmhouse past the cemetery where he would be buried. When I arrived, the stepfather opened the door and motioned me to the living room. The young man had died in his mother's arms. He had stopped shaving some weeks before, so his beard had grown in. Mother cradling the body of her dead son.

In my time with the family, I found out that the stepfather was not baptized. I'll call him Jim. We had many talks sitting at the wooden kitchen table—some profound, some less so.

And Jim had questions: not so much why this had happened to his stepson, but where was God? Where was hope? He knew his wife and son had been baptized. Jim wanted to know what that meant, what difference it made.

I answered that God was with Jim's stepson in his pain. I explained that baptism was the gift of life that brought forgiveness, that baptism made us part of the body of Christ, the church, and that baptism made those who had been strangers from God and each other part of the same

family. I told him that baptism was an unbreakable relationship between God and God's people because God loves us and doesn't want to lose a single one of us, that not even death can separate us from God's love.

Jim asked to be baptized. He came to the realization that, as it has been said, water really is thicker than blood. Baptism doesn't guarantee a life without struggle or hardship, but it makes us part of the one who suffered, died and was buried—and who through that suffering and death, defeated death, So at that wooden kitchen table with a stainless-steel mixing bowl filled with water, Jim was baptized into Christ.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:3-5).

We have been through a difficult season in our country and our church. I'm not sure if we will ever completely understand the effects of the pandemic's stress on all of us. The pandemic laid bare racial inequities and disparities in access to medical care, housing, employment and law enforcement. Civic discourse has become coarse and mean. Life is seen as a zero-sum game—if your side gets something then mine loses out.

This is also played out in the church. Of course, there is room for debate and disagreement, there is room to call out one part of the church when it has hurt another. There is even room for justified anger. But there is no room to dissolve the bond of baptism. It isn't even possible. In Christ we are individually members one of another.

Sometimes we might feel like we are stuck with each other. This is the great mystery and beauty of the wounded body of Christ—we are woven together. Praise the One who makes us one.

This is the First Sunday of Advent. We are woven together in baptism to prepare for the coming of Jesus as a baby or the second coming of Christ as the Lord of glory in a blessed event. But it is not so blessed if we aren't prepared and eager for the arrival of our Savior and Redeemer.

### **Why Do We Resist Preparing?**

It's human nature to resist being told what to do.

Harry R. Truman (not Harry S.) was born October 30, 1896. His birthday isn't important, but the day he died is. Truman, according to Wikipedia, “was an American businessman, bootlegger, and prospector. He lived near Mount St. Helens, an active volcano in the state of Washington, and was the owner and caretaker of Mount St. Helens Lodge at Spirit Lake near the base of the mountain. Truman came to fame as a folk hero in the months leading up to the volcano's 1980 eruption after refusing to leave his home despite evacuation orders. He was killed by a flow that overtook his lodge and buried the site under 150 feet of volcanic debris.”

Truman died May 18, 1980, when Mount St. Helens erupted. He reminds us of Jesus' comments in our text: “Understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into” (v. 43). But not Truman. He refused to be told what to do. He loved the mountain, no doubt. But he was cantankerous and stubborn, and many thought he was an old fool.

So why don't we get ready? Why don't we prepare? One expert explains: People do not prepare for emergencies because they believe:

- “Everything will be fine.”
- “The odds of a disaster are too small.”
- “I’ll jinx the whole thing if I prep.”
- “The government will save me.”
- “Someone else has prepped enough for the both of us.”
- “I don’t have enough room.”
- “I don’t have enough time.”
- “People will think I’m crazy.”
- “I don’t have enough money.”
- “I don’t have the right skills.”
- “I refuse to give in to fear and paranoia.”
- “I’m too old.”
- “My faith will save me.”

Everyone can identify with at least one of these excuses — and possibly most of them. They range from unreasonable optimism to disbelief, denial, doubt, fear, and a hope and a prayer: “Worst case scenario, someone will rescue me.”

Jesus seems to say otherwise: “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left” (v. 40).

The apostle Paul reinforces the idea that there is a line that one crosses, there's a point of no return, there's a missed opportunity and additional chances are not possible. He writes to the Corinthians: "Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Our text today is the *carpe diem* of the New Testament. Seize the day! Stay awake. Prepare and get ready! We haven't a moment to lose!

### **Does Jesus Have an ETA?**

Jesus explicitly says that the "Son" does not know the "day or hour" (v. 36). Does Jesus know when he will return? The answer is "no."

Being ready would not be a problem if we knew when Jesus was returning. Then we could party hardy and sober up before his arrival. One writer put it this way: "Here, as is always the case, God reveals enough about the future to give us hope, but not so much that we do not have to live and walk by faith day after day."

Throughout the centuries there have been many wrong predictions about when Jesus will return. Listen to the words of Jesus: "About that day and hour, no one knows" (v. 36). What is there about the words coming out of his mouth that we don't understand? "No. One. Knows." How can anyone presume to know what the Lord himself has professed to know?

This is precisely why we must be in a state of readiness. When Jim's stepson died from cancer, he realized he needed to prepare for Jesus coming to take him home. Jim was baptized into Christ.

But we do not know. We must be ready, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (v. 44).

### **What Does the Bible Say?**

“The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down.” (Proverbs 21:20)

“Therefore, let us not sleep, as others *do*, but let us watch and be sober.” (1 Thessalonians 5:6)

“Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.” (1 Corinthians 16:13)

### **What Should We Do?**

Verses 36 through 41 are interesting.

Jesus’ words here are preparatory to his main point — the point on which we preachers should dwell: *Be ready*. “Keep awake therefore,” he says.

Again, in verse 44, this message is repeated: “Be ready.”

- Be ready *to welcome the presence of Jesus*.
- Be ready *to be a servant of God*.
- Be ready *to live as we’re supposed to live*.
- Be ready *to act in the interests of the kingdom*.
- Be ready *to be faithful*.

This is the meaning of Paul’s comment to the Ephesian church, when he advises them to “[make] the most of time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16). This verse is preceded by a verse that acts like an alarm clock, as though Paul is banging on the bedroom door:

“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead!” Then he continues, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.”

We must then redeem the time. That is, we must be on high alert, ready to seize the moment to welcome the presence of Christ, to be a servant of God, to “be careful then how we live” (v. 15).

A person who lives in a state of readiness is a person who looks for opportunities to glorify God. This is a person who lives in anticipation of teachable moments, and who also is aware of dangers along the way. He or she pays attention to possible pitfalls or potential dangers. They see the signs that say, “Mind your head,” or “watch your step.”

We don’t know much about when Jesus might show up in a cloud of glory, but we can be prepared for the moment when Jesus wants us to show up in his name in the lives of those around us. In his name, we love, we serve, we show kindness.

In short, we live as though Jesus has already come again.

For he has ... in us!

May the peace of God . . .

#435 – Lo! He Comes With Clouds Descending