

The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: November 12, 2017

Proper 27: Matthew 23: 1-13: *Make Ready*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

A young woman was getting ready for a blind date. She was to have dinner at a very high end restaurant with live music and dancing. She was excited. She had her hair done, spent time getting her makeup just right, put on her best dress and was ready for her date's arrival. However, his expected arrival time came and went. After waiting an hour, she decided she had been stood up. Disheartened, she took off her dress, let down her hair, put on her pajamas, took a pint of chocolate ice cream out of the freezer and sat down to watch TV. About an hour later the doorbell rang. It was her date. He looked at her with a surprised expression and said, "What? I gave you an extra two hours and you're still not ready?" Her trial will begin next Tuesday. I know some of the women in the congregation are thinking, "Justifiable homicide."

In today's gospel from Matthew, Jesus tells us a parable about ten young women who were invited to a wedding party. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The wise ones carried some extra oil in jars along with their lamps just in case the bridegroom was delayed. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any extra oil with them. Jesus ends this parable with this admonition: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

The question for all of us is this: Are we prepared? Do we have oil for your lamps? Who knows what tomorrow may bring for any of us? Who knows what kind of severe test we might confront? On the other hand, who knows what door of opportunity might also open? None of us knows what tomorrow may bring. Growing up, I was a Boy Scout. As you know, scout motto is "Be prepared." That always stuck with me. I am a big believer in preparation. Preparation requires work. I have found that the better your preparation the better and easier your execution is to follow. We can all think of situations in which preparation was the critical difference in success or failure, even life or death.

One of the most famous tragedies in history occurred on April 10, 1912. On that date the great ocean liner Titanic set sail from Southampton, England on

its maiden voyage to New York City. Everybody thought the Titanic was a floating fortress. Even the ship's captain, John Smith, believed the ship was unsinkable. So, he wasn't worried a single bit when the Titanic received 6 warnings that there was ice in the sea ahead. This was on April 14, just four days into the trip. Consequently, the ship was traveling near its maximum speed when the ship's navigation officer, Fredrick Fleet, sighted an iceberg floating right in the path of the big ship. Fleet contacted the ship's First Officer William Murdoch who maneuvered desperately to avoid the impending collision. Unable to turn the ship quick enough, however, the ship suffered a glancing blow from the iceberg that buckled the ship's starboard side and opened five of her sixteen compartments to the sea. The Titanic had been designed to stay afloat with four of her forward compartments flooded but no more, and the crew soon realized that the ship would sink. Officer Murdoch immediately informed Captain Smith, who, remarkably continued to dine with distinguished passengers and finish a second cigar. In just over 2 hours the "unsinkable" Titanic was gone with a loss of 1,490 lives. Captain Smith had already planned that the Titanic's first voyage would be his last. At the age of 59, he was ready to retire. He never got that chance.

Why such a terrible loss of lives? Part of the reason was that the crew--from the captain on down--was unprepared. For example, the Titanic had been

outfitted with 20 lifeboats, enough to hold only half of the passengers. Even worse, many of the lifeboats were mismanaged. In some of the lifeboats that could hold 40, some contained only 12 passengers when they fled the sinking ship. Many died because First class passengers and Steerage passengers were separated even when it came to sitting in a life boat together. My God it just boggles my mind.

So, why were they unprepared for a tragedy at sea? Because everybody believed the Titanic couldn't be sunk. It was one of the deadliest peacetime maritime disasters in history. We need to understand that life is like that. Nobody knows what the future may bring. Numerous tragedies have occurred throughout history because people were not prepared. Jesus was giving us sage advice when he said, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." Even though we may think we have everything under control, life can throw us some nasty curves. So, be prepared.

Let me say something to the younger members of our congregation. Nobody knows what the future may hold in terms of the health of our society. We may be on the cusp of greatness as a people or we may be on the cusp of something else entirely. For example, experts tell us that we have moved to the point in science and technology with regard to such things as robotics and artificial

intelligence, that we could already replace 50% of the jobs in our country if we chose to. Think of that. Half the jobs in America could be gone seemingly overnight. I'm not trying to cause a panic, but that's the situation. It's like the old joke that the factory of the future will contain only a dog, a man and a computer. The man's job will be to feed the dog. The dog's job will be to keep the man away from the computer. Are you preparing for such a world? One thing we know is that the future is on the side of people who study hard, who work hard and work smart, who keep their eyes open and those who prepare and make ready. "Therefore keep watch . . ." says Jesus, and that has never been truer than it is today.

History is on the side of those who are prepared. Of course, that has always been so. Let's move ahead a few years, from 1912, to the year 1940. Europe, and indeed the entire world have been thrown into a panic. Germany, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler has invaded and defeated France and Holland. Any nation standing in the way of the German army has been crushed. Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister of England, had been duped by Hitler and thoroughly discredited and so resigned from office. Subsequently on May 10, 1940, King George VI of England invited Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, to his Palace. When Churchill arrived at the palace, the King wasted no time in instructing Churchill to

form a new government. Churchill was by no means the obvious choice for this position. He was regarded by many politicians as unreliable and impetuous for, among other things, his unrelenting opposition to the appeasement of Nazi Germany. Despite this, the outbreak of war with Germany in 1939 proved Churchill right. He was made prime minister on the same day that Germany invaded Belgium and Luxembourg. Churchill swiftly went to work after receiving this commission. He immediately arranged a meeting with advisors, government officials and military officers with the goal of forming a coalition government.

This would have been a daunting task for most people, but afterwards Churchill wrote: “As I went to bed at about 3 A.M., I was conscious of a profound sense of relief. At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene. I felt as if I were walking with Destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial. My warnings over the last six years had been so numerous, so detailed, and were now so terribly vindicated, that no one could or would contradict me. I could not be reproached either for making the war or with want of preparation for it. I thought I knew a good deal about it all, and I was sure, I should not fail.”

Winston Churchill was prepared when his time came. History is on the side of people who are prepared.

My sisters and brothers, there is a universal principle I follow and I encourage you to do the same: Do not throw away tomorrow. That's so easy to do. We throw away tomorrow when ideas come and we are not ready for them, so we move on. 'I'll pass on this one,' we say, not really knowing what doors to opportunity we are closing. We don't even give the idea serious attention. We throw away tomorrow when challenges come or when problems hit us. We throw away tomorrow when we get our priorities all mixed up and we lose our vision. Stay the course. When you get overwhelmed, please do not throw away tomorrow. Don't throw away your tomorrow by not preparing yourself as much as possible today.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, the most important preparation we can make concerns our relationship with God. Today's gospel message is all about being prepared for Christ's return. And the only possible preparation we could make for that final day would be our spiritual readiness. Like those ominous billboards we used to see along the highways, "Are you ready to meet your Maker?" But that's true of all of life.

We ought to be spiritually prepared for going off to college, or taking a new job or marrying a spouse, or having a surgical procedure, etc. Our spiritual preparation will determine how we will handle the ups and downs of life, the

successes and failures, the heartaches and the celebrations. That is why coming to church every week is so necessary to our lives. That is why daily reading of Scripture and spending time in prayer is so necessary for us. We are preparing ourselves for whatever may come our way.

In the story of the Greek mythological figure Atlas we find that he has offended Zeus, king of the Greek gods and Zeus condemned him to hold the weight of the world on his shoulders. That was as harsh a punishment as the ancient Greek mind could conjure up. Today, it seems, we have volunteered to play the role of Atlas. We have not offended God, we have dismissed God. We have told God that we are big girls and big boys now. We have told God that we are all grown up and that we don't need God's help anymore. We can carry the weight of the whole world upon our shoulders. The question is, when the world gets too heavy for us what then? When there are questions too hard for human knowledge to answer, what then? When life's problems take more time to solve than any of us have what then? My brothers and sisters, will we be too proud? Will be too stubborn and pig headed to admit that we have made a mistake in wanting to carry this world alone? What then?

Our challenge this week is to recognize in our minds, bodies and Holy Spirits that we need God to help us carry the heavy burdens we carry every day.

When you are confused about the future, go to your good and caring shepherd. When you are anxious about where the next buck will come from, talk with the Lord who provides us just enough. Are your challenges too great? Seek the help of the Lord of peace. Is your body sick? Are your emotions fragile? Talk with the Lord who heals you. The great physician will see you now. Do you feel like a soldier stranded behind enemy lines? Take refuge under God's flag. But always remember, the best preparation for all of life is to be spiritually prepared. "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." Are you in training spiritually? Are you drawing closer to God each day? Don't be foolish about life. Victory comes to the man or the woman who is prepared. So, make ready! AMEN.