

Sermon on Luke 12:32-40
12th Sunday After Pentecost, August 7, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
by Eric Fought

“Be Prepared”

Grace and peace to you, dear friends in Christ, from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A number of years ago, I worked, believe it or not, for the Department of the Navy, as a civilian Public Affairs Officer. What makes the story even more unbelievable, is that my office was located in Omaha, Nebraska, far from even a whiff of salt water.

Part of my job was to travel around the Midwest, providing media relations support to the Navy’s public operations, like the Blue Angels flight squadron and the tactical parachute team, known as the Leap Frogs. I also traveled with the Navy band, which often played in schools to help with recruitment efforts and goodwill.

One such tour took me to a high school in a small town in South Dakota, the kind of town with three bars and a church. My assignment that day was to staff the Navy rock band and a Navy Captain who my boss’s boss reported to in the chain of command.

The Captain told the students a story about his most previous assignment, a tour in service to the President at the White House. He was in charge of overseeing emergency preparedness operations and began his duties in the spring of 2001. In his first few days on the job, the Captain asked the officer training him about all of the binders that filled the bookshelves in his office, binders marked with labels like “domestic terrorism” or “large scale disaster.”

The officer training him said, “oh, you don’t need to worry about reading any of them, they have been collecting dust for years.”

A few months later, on the morning of September 11, 2001, the Captain found himself grabbing those binders as he walked down the halls of the West Wing to begin to prepare to brief the President and the President’s cabinet.

The Captain’s message to those high school students in South Dakota that afternoon in 2004 was simple: Be Prepared.

And that is the message I take from this morning’s gospel text as well. Make purses, be dressed for action, have your lamps lit, we are told. We do not know what to expect, or when to expect it. But we know that at any moment, the tables will be turned, and instead of serving God, we will find ourselves the ones being served. Much to unpack, for sure.

But it's also important to note how this passage from Luke begins. Do not be afraid. Indeed, right now, that might be the most important message to walk away with this morning.

Do not be afraid. How important those four words are for us, and for the world in which we live. Indeed, fear seems to be engulfing us at times. We just witnessed two weeks of national political conventions in which fear took center stage each and every night. While the messages were different, and the proposed paths forward for our country were in stark contrast, fear was ever present. For some, the fear expressed was the fear of immigrants, of Muslims, of brown and black bodies, of women leading, of scarcity and diversity. For others, the fear peddled was the fear of another party assuming control, of opponents finding themselves with nuclear codes and supreme court vacancies. A fear of our country moving backward, rather than keeping on a path viewed as being one of progress.

Regardless of where one falls on the political divide, there is no doubt that fear motivates and fear divides us.

Do not be afraid, little flock, Jesus reminds us this morning. The kingdom is ours. The world is ready, indeed, it yearns for us to be prepared, to be dressed for action.

As many of you know, I spent the week in Mankato. I was there for ISALAH weeklong training, not for the Vikings training camp, although I did run into a bunch of fans downtown every day. We also were in a hotel that was situated right next to the Verizon Center, which hosted the rock band KISS one night during our stay. More than a few concert-goers shared puzzled looks as they asked us what ISALAH stood for.

For many of us attending the training, the question, "why are you here?" was difficult to answer at first. However, throughout the week, as we shared together our experiences of how the world has shown up in our lives in painful ways, we found that each of us was called in a powerful way to do as Jesus asks of us this morning. To do what is necessary, to prepare ourselves, to be ready to take action.

I walked into the experience deeply afraid, in deep pain and unsure about why I was there. I felt alone, as I have been feeling a lot lately, unprepared for the many ways in which God is asking me and all of us to show up.

And then I began to not only share my own experiences, but to hear the stories of others. With each one-on-one conversation, I watched as men and women became vulnerable, sharing the trauma they have experienced in the world. I heard stories of undocumented immigrants who have been separated from their families, many of whom have toiled in fields and restaurants and stores and hotels like the one in which we slept, earning little more than slave wages.

I heard of the pain of men and women of color, who fear for their lives in the streets of our cities, who are long past hoping that the system will get better. And I heard the pain of white men and women who, like me, have struggled to find ways to show up, and who

have been deeply affected by the public structures of our society that seek to divide us and do.

I told of how I come from a tradition, the Roman Catholic Church, which has said to me over and over again, that I do not deserve to wear this shirt and this collar. That, because of who am I and whom I have loved, I am disordered, not worthy to lead, to minister, to preach. For much of my life, I've believed that lie. And that lie has kept me from lighting my lamp, from letting my light shine brightly.

I also shared of how I, as a white man, am deeply afraid of wanting to show up in the struggle for racial reconciliation as someone who believes he can save the day, and how that fear has kept me from standing in solidarity with my brothers and sisters, my family.

We gathered together, nearly 100 of us from around the country, at a moment in our shared history that none of us have ever witnessed before. Our world is broken and it often seems that it can't be repaired. People are angry and hurt and afraid and the end result of that anger, hurt and fear is showing up on our television screens and newsfeeds every single day.

After all, hurt people hurt people.

Let me say that again. Hurt people hurt people.

But what became most evident to me, after spending six days in deep conversation and hearing testimony after testimony, was that the only way in which we will be able to realize anything close to the kingdom, the only way in which we will be ready for what is to come, is if we come to the realization that we all have pain, and we all have to work through that pain in order to claim our power to change the world.

If we do nothing else, let us help each other realize that the pain we feel, the pain that keeps us from believing we are children of God, is not to be carried by ourselves, that it is shared by each of us. The details are often different, the depths varied. But, may we help each other realize that we are not alone and that there is a path forward beyond what often seems impossible to walk through.

Let us say to each other, and those we meet, I see you, I am you, and I love you.

I see you. I am you. I love you.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her book, "Altar in the World,"

"There will always be people who run from every kind of pain and suffering, just as there will always be religions that promise to put them to sleep. For those willing to stay awake, pain remains a reliable altar in the world, a place to discover that a life can be full of meaning as it is of hurt. The two have never

canceled each other out and I doubt they ever will, at least not until each of us—or all of us together—find the way through."

I see you. I am you. I love you.

Do not be afraid. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Be prepared.

Amen.