

“Keep Your Lamps Burning”
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, Luke 12:32-40
Rev. Joy Laughridge
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My girls and their dad spent some time in a little town in Idaho called Challis several years ago, and I remember them telling me that the Walmart had a specialty section near the front of the store with a sign that said “Preppers.” I didn’t know what a prepper was, and I’d never seen that section in any Walmart I’ve been in so their dad had to explain it to me. “Preppers,” if you don’t know, are people who gather supplies, learn skills, and make plans to be prepared in the event of some catastrophic event. It seems like a lot of conspiracy theorists are preppers, but you don’t have to be a conspiracy theorist to be a prepper. Some people by nature are just more motivated to plan ahead and some personality types are just more prone to thinking through all of the what-ifs because it makes them feel more secure to be prepared for anything that might happen. I have a friend like this and one thing she told me is that she always overpacks because she brings things for every contingency that she can think of.

Our Gospel passage got me thinking about those preppers out in Idaho and my friend who tries to be ready for anything when she packs because in the passage Jesus is talking to his disciples about being prepared. Be dressed for action. Keep your lamps burning, he says. Jesus wanted them, and he wants us, to be ready for the arrival of the Son of Man and the day of final judgement. You could say that Jesus is instructing his disciples to be “preppers,” but if we are going to use that terminology, we should define the term based on what the Bible says about being prepared rather than just adopting the term as it is typically used because there are some differences. There are at least two that I want to talk about that are highlighted in the readings this morning. So, let’s look and listen to what God has to say to us

today about what it means and what it looks like to live as people who are ready and prepared for the coming of Jesus and the new heaven and earth he is bringing to us.

The Gospel passage begins with Jesus saying, “do not be afraid, little flock,” and this is one of the big differences between the kind of prepper who is preparing for potential disasters and a prepper who is preparing for the arrival of Jesus. Fear that there won’t be enough food; fear that the government is going to turn on us; fear that aliens are going to invade and use up all our resources; fear of a catastrophic storm. *Fear* of a potentially terrible future motivates preppers to get ready, but it’s joyful anticipation of a wonderful future that is meant to motivate Jesus’s disciples to get ready.

Earlier in Luke 12, Jesus has already been talking about living with a perspective on life and reality that extends beyond the world that we physically see. He tells a parable about a wealthy man who spent his life building bigger and bigger barns. Like a good prepper, he needed the big barns so he could stockpile all his crops and grain, but then he dies, and the big barns filled with all the grain and crops and useless to him. Jesus tells the parable to make that point that life isn’t about accumulating stuff. Life doesn’t consist in the abundance of things, Jesus says. Then Jesus goes from the parable to teaching the disciples not to worry. If you don’t have all the things that make life in this world more comfortable, or pleasurable, or that make you feel secure in it, or if you aren’t one of the “winners” as this world defines winners, don’t worry, he says. For one thing, your Father in heaven knows what you need and is able and willing to meet your true needs, and for another thing, there are a lot of things that influencers, and advertisers, and your peers might convince you are needs that have no eternal value and will disappear someday. These ideas carry over into the first part of our reading for today when Jesus says, “don’t be afraid.” He is emphasizing that the life we live in this world isn’t all

there is so don't be overly attached to or overly invested in it. The world and life as we know it in this world are ultimately coming to an end, and we should be preparing for that day and looking forward to it.

When you think about the end of the world, or judgement day maybe you don't think of that as something to look forward to. Maybe the idea of the end of the world as we know it sounds frightening, and there are plenty of books, and movies, and terrifying interpretations of the book of Revelation that stir up feelings of fear about the coming of Christ even for some believers. If you associate that day with images of bloody battles, and people being tortured, and literal dragons and multi-headed monsters wreaking havoc everywhere, it's easy to understand why you would anticipate that day with dread rather than joy, but that kind of depiction of Jesus's return is a misunderstanding of what that kind of symbolism and imagery is meant to convey. It *is* true that the Bible tells us that there will be a judgment day. The ancient prophets of Israel referred to this day as the Day of the Lord, but the Israelites weren't afraid of that day. They looked forward to the Day of the Lord because it was the day when God would set things right again. Wickedness would be condemned and righteousness would be rewarded. The way that the ancient Israelites looked forward to the Day of the Lord is the way that God's people today are meant to look forward to Jesus's return. He is bringing a final day of judgment, but that day is only a fearful day for the Evil One and for any who refuse to forsake evil. For Jesus's disciples who already trust and submit to him, he is bringing the final and completed version of reality where there is no more resistance to or rebellion against his rule. It is a day that God's people can look forward to and prepare for with joy and eagerness because it will be a day when the blessings and rewards that we hope and wait for will be fulfilled. So, this is one difference between doomsday preppers and Kingdom of God preppers. It's joyful hope not fearful despair that

motivates us to ready ourselves for the future. Now let's move on to a second difference.

A prepper in the traditional sense of the word is usually preparing for those “what-if?” scenarios; things that *could* happen or *might* happen, but there is no guarantee that they will. In contrast, Jesus encourages his disciples to be ready for something that *is* going to happen. He *is* going to come. He *is* going to put an end once and for all to the dark powers that have corrupted this world, and he is going to bring something better. The skeptics might say, the skeptics *do* say, that we really can't know this for sure. We can only know what we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. Maybe this was the only kind of knowing that the rich man in Jesus's parable was willing to accept. I can only be sure that I would be in trouble in this life if I had no way to feed myself and no comfortable place to live so I will do everything in my power to ensure that my life in the world I can see and know will always be comfortable. That is one way of knowing and one way to live, but there is another kind of knowing that enables us to live in this world in the way that Jesus urges us to live. This other kind of knowing is described in the reading from Hebrews.

Some of you probably already knew the words of Hebrews 11:1 from memory without even having to read them. *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Faith is a different kind of knowing that isn't knowing based solely on what we can see with our eyes or touch with our hands. It is a knowing that rests on God and God's faithfulness, and it is a kind of knowing that can influence and shape the way we live in this world just as much as other ways of knowing influence us. Hebrews 11 gives a whole roster of people who lived by this kind of knowing and offers examples of things that they did in their lives because of this kind of knowing, but it's Abraham and Sarah who are highlighted in the portion we read this morning. Abraham made real life decisions – he got up and moved

his family *because* he believed that he was pursuing the call of God. He and Sarah had a child and believed that the child was a gift from God and the firstborn of many descendants that God had promised. Abraham and Sarah lived and prepared themselves to receive the fulfillment of all of God's promises, and in verse 13, the author of Hebrews says that Abraham and Sarah and the others died in faith without having received the promises, *but from a distance they saw and greeted them*. In other words, they lived their days on this earth anticipating and preparing to receive all that God had promised.

This is kind of the bottom line of what Jesus was getting at in Luke 12. He was urging his followers and those who would become his followers to live *now* in light of the truth that you have to believe to be able to see. Usually the phrase goes "I'll believe it when I see it," and believing comes only by seeing, but this is different. This is being able to see things that are real and true *by* believing. Faith is like the pair of glasses that we put on that enables us to see what is really going on. Without faith, we only see the world as it appears to the naked eye. It looks exactly the way the Psalmist describes it in Psalm 73. He observed the success of the wicked and the unjust. He saw how their lives seemed easy and despite their evil deeds, there never seemed to be any consequences. He saw the easy lives of the rich, and he almost fell for this great deception. He almost believed there is no hope for the righteous, that there is nothing good to look forward to, that there is no reason to pursue justice and goodness, but then faith comes to the rescue when he goes into the sanctuary of God. He says, I couldn't make sense of this mixed-up world, but when I went into the sanctuary of God, then I perceived the truth. By faith he knows that God is just, and faithful. He knows that God will make things right in the end, and he knows that there is no other way to truly live than with and in alignment with God.

I'm not sure if I've been able to make a simple point, or if I've managed to make a point simply, but I think everything that has been said today can be summed up in this way. Jesus calls us to live as people prepared for his arrival, and the best way to be prepared for the new reality that he will someday bring is by living today as if it is already here. The truth is that Jesus's kingdom *is* already here wherever people live under his rule and follow his way. One commentator puts it this way. "Faith produces a life that manifests in the here and now the kind of things that God promises will make up the future." The difficulty that we sometimes have is that we become too consumed with only what we can see. We become enamored with the fleeting things this world has to offer. We become consumed with worry about whether we'll be comfortable, and fear and anxiety creep in to our hearts. We see the terrible pain and suffering and injustice that go on in the world and even in our own lives sometimes, and we become tempted to despair. Like the Psalmist we find ourselves on the verge of thinking maybe there really isn't anything good to look forward to or prepare for. Maybe all of those promises of a new heaven and a new earth are wishful thinking and we would be better off ditching Jesus and his crazy teachings and submitting to our fears instead. We have come into God's sanctuary today, and God is here for us to behold. God speaks to us today through God's word to remind us that what we see isn't all there is and Jesus reminds us to keep our lamps burning. Keep them burning with acts of generosity and selflessness that others just don't understand. Keep them burning by devoting yourselves to caring for the poor and by defending the cause of the powerless. Keep them burning by speaking words of truth, and grace, and mercy. Keep them burning by turning from evil and embracing righteousness. These acts of faithfulness and obedience are the coins that fill our purses that won't wear out. They are our investment in the future that Jesus is bringing, and if we live this way, we will be ready for Jesus when he comes. Amen.

