

August 24th message

Today's gospel reading made me think of a show I watched in the past when we still had a certain channel. The show is called, "Alone" perhaps you have heard of it or watched it. The show challenges selected people to survive 100 days in the wilderness. They usually start out in the fall so they have time to prepare for winter in the northern climates, but they also go to any remote region including deserts and try to survive. The contestants are given a standard kit of essential survival gear, clothing, and first aid/emergency supplies. Then they are allowed to choose 10 items from an approved list. Most choose a sleeping bag, one pot for cooking, snare wire, a fishing line with a hook, a multi-tool, maybe a saw, or axe, and some choose a bow and arrows.

It is also interesting to see what is not allowed. Any kind of lighter or matches are not allowed, along with bug spray, sunscreen, firearms, and certain hygiene products. You do get one bar of soap though. Now I don't know about you but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't last too long. Some have made it the full 100 days. Needless to say those who have trained in survival training do the best. You could say they are the best prepared.

Speaking of being prepared, once there was a guy who ordered chicken in a restaurant. He was very pleased with the flavor of it and asked the waiter how the chickens were prepared for cooking. The waiter replied, "I'm not sure, but I'm pretty confident the chickens are already dead."

Today's gospel reading could be summed up in the old Boy Scout motto, "Be prepared." Chances are we understand that concept in many areas of our lives. I have been doing some miscellaneous projects this summer and have to always think what I will need for each job. So I try to think of all the things I might encounter and pack up in the truck. Most of the time I have what I need, but once in a while I don't have this or that, or something as minor as a drill bit breaks and I don't have a spare. Those of you who manage a household know that laundry and dishes are a never ending job. Even with just two people in our house right now, I'm amazed at how fast the hamper gets filled and how quickly the dishes pile up.

Those of you who farm also know about preparedness. The harvest will begin soon and much equipment has to be made ready. Grain bins need to be emptied and prepared for the new crop. Those who attend school also know all about preparation. School supplies, maybe some new clothes and shoes and changes in routine are all part of this preparation.

So as we look at how we spend our time we see how being prepared is a big part of lives. Often we can be so overwhelmed in what needs to be done with all the commitments we have that we overlook our relationship with God. The days, weeks, and months go by quickly. We seem to be busier than ever and before you know it our connection with the Almighty suffers.

Jesus warns His listeners of this in our reading today. He knew how the cares and worries of everyday life could demand much attention. He tells how one must keep their lamps lit. That can be hard for us in this day and age of electricity and flipping a switch to comprehend. The people at the time would have understood it well. "Keep your lamps lit" was understood as maintaining spiritual readiness and vigilance. It's a call to stay spiritually awake, actively serving God, and remaining prepared for His arrival.

In this reading Luke seems to be summarizing some points Jesus made earlier in the chapter. My study Bible mentions five attributes of those who are diligent in preparing for the Lord's return. Basically these are ways we live out our lives and reflect God's love as we go through life and have our dealings with others.

Early in the chapter Jesus speaks of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. As you and I both know hypocrisy is alive and well in our world today. Many are quick to notice and comment on it. But others also notice when one is sincere in their faith and really wants to do good. That has always been the challenge, to care and sincerely want what is best for the other. Sometimes that can be quite difficult and we might feel like people are taking advantage of us. As always, we need God's guidance and direction as we are confronted with different situations.

A few years ago the church I attend in Keokuk decided there was enough need for us to have our own food pantry. We had always collected different items and taken it to the food bank located across town. Rather than sending different folks there were started keeping our own. Just the other morning I met one guy who visits us on a regular basis. He was eating a can of beef stew at 9:00 in the morning. He appeared homeless by the look of his filled backpack. We visited about some general things for a few minutes and he went on his way. We didn't get to his situation in life and in my opinion it wasn't necessary. By the grace of God, we offered a service and he used it.

The next two attributes of those who are prepared for the Lord's return kind of go together. They include not being fearful and worried about the direction God's plan for one's life might hold. Often the Lord presents us with opportunities to witness in the smallest of ways. Many times we ignore or brush off what or who we encounter. We can be tempted to fit in and not take a stand for what our faith teaches us. Earlier in the chapter Jesus tells how whoever acknowledges me before others the Son of Man will acknowledge. This just does not just include in a friendly setting, it also involves taking risks, trusting in the Lord to help. Frankly speaking we can be afraid to stand up for what Jesus has taught. Yet Jesus tells, don't worry, don't be afraid. Six times, in the Gospel of Luke alone, He repeats this message. Altogether there are twenty-one times in the New Testament where Jesus and other writers address this anxiety.

Many Old Testament prophets and leaders questioned their ability to speak and lead for the Lord. But God assured them that He would be with them and give them the right words to say in different situations. Moses felt he was unworthy. In the beginning of Exodus he questions his ability a few times. Exodus 3:11 Moses states, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" and again in Exodus 4:1, he questions, "What if they do not believe me or listen to my voice?". Yet God assures him in God promises to help Moses speak, stating, "I will help you as you speak and I will teach you what to say" (Exodus 4:12).

Jeremiah also questioned his readiness to be God's prophet. The beginning of the book of Jeremiah is sometimes quoted. Verses 4-8 are familiar to many, "The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. "Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord."

God has a way of working through all of us, no matter what our age or abilities. A pastor named Donald Griggs in my daily devotional booklet tells about his struggles. He tells of the times in ministry when he faced crisis situations and never was sure of what to say. He tells how God helped him find the right words and actions to convey.

We too can find ourselves in difficult situations. We can be quick to express our feelings in our very opinioned time that we are living through. Often a pause and quick prayer asking for God's grace and guidance is the best approach.

The last two attributes of those ready for the Lord's return have to do with stewardship. Verse 34 before today's reading sums up what Jesus was trying to teach about possessions. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Every year for the past 7 years I have been involved in taking inventory at one of my part time jobs. Sometimes I really question the value of it especially when it comes to counting all the little stuff, like every nut and bolt, yes every one. The big, costly stuff I understand but the little stuff... But I do it anyway....

One of the articles I read my study of this passage spoke of how one needs to take sort of an inventory of one's life once in a while. While starting with all the possessions one might have is a good place to start, he spoke of how this leads one to realize the priority one puts on things. This helps one realize what they really value in life or what one's treasure is.

Preparing for the return of the Lord involves aligning one's heart with the kingdom and its values, with God and God's son and the Holy Spirit, and ridding one's self of anything that stands in the way of that, anything.

That can be a tough order especially in the selfish times we are living. Preparing for the Lord's return is a call to be diligent in our faith and not slack off. Often we can put what God calls us to do on the back burner. We may not necessarily plan it that way, but we can push it aside. We can be like the slaves who think they have plenty of time, taking a chance that the master will be a long time in coming. This can be one of the biggest challenges we face.

Again we are called to be prepared. We are called to live the values of the kingdom now, as best we can, as a church and as individual believers. We are called to love and serve one another and the body of Christ we call the church. May we keep our lamps trimmed and be ready. Amen.