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AMDG

Proper 27A, November 12, 2017

What does it mean to be ready? That's the question that we consider in the light of today's Gospel. And, it should be the question that guides us throughout our lives. What does it mean to live one's life in full expectancy of God's guidance and protection? What does it mean to live one's life fully prepared for the flow of God's blessings, like a great wedding banquet?

At this time in our nation's history, we seem to be on constant alert for the next shoe to fall - the next shooting, the next act of terrorism, the next political scandal, the next disaster. We can almost get hardened to a constant barrage of negative news. A leadership guru I used to read, Peter Vaill called it a state of permanent white water.

By the time St. Matthew wrote this parable, the followers of Jesus may have thought they were living in a state of permanent white water. They'd been waiting for Jesus return for fifty years or more. Most of the eye-witnesses were dead, many by violent means. The church had spread, but it had also been viciously oppressed. The Temple, revered by both the Jews who confessed Jesus and those who did not, had been destroyed, and all Jews had been expelled from Palestine. The great Roman Empire was expanding both east and west, and high taxes and enslavement of the conquered was used to fund massive construction project.

And, at the time Paul was writing the letter to the Thessalonians, thirty years earlier than Matthew's parable, he was addressing anxiety among the very new followers of Jesus about what would happen at the second coming. Later in this letter he writes very explicitly about how followers of Jesus should be living their lives. And what did he write about - no different than what Matthew wrote, or Luke or John, or what any of the other apostles wrote or taught. No different than what Jesus taught and demonstrated in a life beset by sorrow and heartache - What does it mean to be prepared in a world that's turned upside down - Love God with all your heart, and soul and mind. And love your neighbor as

yourself. Give generously, love extravagantly, forgive without counting the cost, welcome without concern for your own needs. This is how Christians prepare for everything - by loving as God loved us.

When we choose to follow Jesus our life choices, our responses to the world should be different, even opposite of what would seem appropriate. So, preparedness for us seems counterintuitive to one who's trust is in the world and it's powers. Because for those of us who trust in the Lord, when we experience the uncertainties and tragedies that happen around us - terrorism, war, change in leadership, financial setbacks, rather than the conventional responses of worry, obsessing, anger, defensiveness, blame, instead we keep focused on the mission - to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. In times of challenge, just like our forbears from the first century, we redouble our efforts of love - we look for opportunities to be more generous, to open ourselves to the blessings around us.

The questions we should be asking ourselves in times of trouble and uncertainty are - How can I be kinder, more patient, more generous, more forgiving to those God puts in front of me?

How can I be more open to God's blessings, more grateful, more willing to release anger, fear and blame? It is by continually keeping our own mirrors clean that we are able to reflect the love of Christ in the world.

It is how Christians prepare themselves for whatever life throws at us. It is how we become more likely receptacles of God's grace.

And, now I'd like to share with you a letter from our bishop -

November 9, 2017

Dear People of God,

This afternoon, I have met with the priests of the Diocese to let them know that I have announced my retirement and am calling for the election of my successor.

This was, of course, an announcement of mixed emotions for me. It has been the greatest honor and joy for me to serve as your bishop for almost 15 years. We have accomplished some great things together, and thanks to your hard work and prayers, the diocese overall is healthy and growing. By the time I retire I will be almost 68 years old. It is time for the diocese to move on to a new mission with younger leadership. It is also time for me to enjoy some new adventures before I get too old to do

so! I am excited to share with you that one of these first adventures will be as a visiting professor of church history at General Theological Seminary in New York for the fall of 2019. Teaching is something which I very much enjoy, and having my two kids (and grandson!) nearby will be an added pleasure.

What happens next? Bishop Todd Ousley, from the Presiding Bishop's Office of Pastoral Development who oversees the transition process for the Episcopal Church, was with us today to outline the next steps. The Standing Committee, with The Rev Canon Daniel Tantimonaco as President, will oversee the search and transition process for the diocese. The Standing Committee and others will be working with a consultant from Bishop Ousley's office throughout this process. The Diocesan Staff's responsibility will be to work hard to keep the diocese doing business as usual throughout this transition. Please know all of us will continue to be available to you when you need us.

The Search Committee is designated by our Canons. It will be composed of four members of the Standing Committee and four Deputies to General Convention (2 clergy and 2 lay from each). It will be their job in the coming months to find a list of final candidates to present to the whole diocese in a series of "walkabouts" before the election takes place at Diocesan Convention on October 19-20, 2018. The bishop-elect will then work with me for a few months before being consecrated as the Sixth Bishop of Arizona on March 9, 2019 by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

I still have almost 18 months to serve you. That will be used to further strengthen many existing programs and projects. I don't intend to be a lame duck! There is still much work to do! But it will also be a time of sharing memories and celebrating our work together. I look forward to that transition process and I especially ask your prayers for the Standing Committee, Search Committee, Diocesan staff, and our whole Diocese as we discern the future of our life together.

Faithfully,

Kirk S Smith V Bishop Arizona