

## TRUMPET READY LIVING

### Sermon, November 6, 2011

**Texts: Psalm 78:1-7; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13**

A weather forecast published in an Iowa newspaper inadvertently left out one very important word. The word was "rain." The report read, "There is a 90% chance of tomorrow." Now, I think all of us here hope the chances are better than that! But who knows? It is good to prepare for tomorrow, and it is also good to be prepared just in case there *is* no tomorrow.

Yes, there is a 90% chance of tomorrow ... that's why, as the Psalmist says, "... *what we have heard and known, what our forefathers have told us. We will not hide from our children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.*" That's why we want children growing up in the church, being part of the church community, knowing what this church believes, knowing our faith traditions, so we *and* they can have a brighter and better tomorrow.

Yes, "There is a 90% chance of tomorrow." Again, I think all of us here hope the chances are better than that! But who knows? It is good to be prepared for whatever tomorrow might, or might not, bring.

I recently read of a man whose initials are J.R. (*let's call him John Roberts*) who, in August 1991, was confident he would see tomorrow. He was prepared. Some of you may remember August 1991, when Hurricane Bob was bearing down on the Atlantic coast. Living alone in his small North Carolina home, John Roberts thought he was well prepared. The winds howled and his power failed, but that didn't faze him. As night fell, he fired up some oil lamps he had taken out of storage and placed his Coleman camping stove on top of the electric range in his kitchen to cook dinner. So what if he had no electricity? He was able to enjoy a delicious meal, thanks to his Coleman stove. He commended himself on his foresight, and went to bed secure in the knowledge that Mother Nature could not beat him! Meanwhile, diligent linemen worked through the night to restore power. Before dawn, power was restored, and all the appliances in John Roberts' house were again working, including the electric range. As prepared as he was, though, J.R. had overlooked one important detail ... he had been using the electric range when the power went off. And since there was no power, he had not thought to turn off the burner on which he had been cooking. Unfortunately, that was the burner over which he had placed the Coleman gas stove. The power returned, the burner on the electric stove came on, and the Coleman gas stove was sitting on that burner ... you guessed it. The stove's gas canister exploded, blowing the kitchen wall two feet off the foundation, snapping several floor joists, and smashing every window in the house. The explosion caused some \$65,000 in damage. Fortunately, John Roberts had closed his bedroom door, so he survived.

Sometimes, no matter how carefully we've prepared or planned ahead, things can figuratively or literally explode! Life is full of the unexpected. Life has a way at times of sneaking up on us and just smacking us on the head. It borders on understatement to say, "Life sends us challenges." We euphemistically call these challenges "learning experiences." But that doesn't mean they don't hurt. We learn all right, but we take our lumps. It is really in our best interests to prepare as best we can by living the best we know how, to be prepared, for we never know what might come our way or when.

Author Gary Richmond, in his book, **A View from the Zoo**, tells of how one member of the animal kingdom, the giraffe, prepares its young for the future. As you know, giraffes have very long legs. The body of a mama giraffe is some ten feet from the ground ... and she does not lower her body when she gives birth. When a calf is born, the calf immediately drops ten feet to the ground and usually lands on its back. What a way to come into the world! Ten feet is a long way to fall. Then after falling on its back, the newborn calf usually rolls over on its stomach with his legs tucked under him. At this point the mother giraffe does something extraordinary. She waits about a minute and then kicks the newborn calf and sends it sprawling head over heels! And she kicks it again, and again until the baby giraffe figures out how to get up and stand up to Mom. The little giraffe standing for the first time on its very wobbly legs is now ready to follow Mom and the rest of the herd. Please understand; I'm not advocating this for human parents. Mama giraffe was not being abusive. Quite the contrary! She knows lions and hyenas and leopards would love to make a meal of a baby giraffe. So, she needs her baby to get to its feet as soon as possible so it can keep up with the herd. Kicking is her way of preparing her young

one, protecting him from predators. Sometimes we may feel as though we have no sooner gotten to our feet when life turns around and suddenly kicks us back down. The next time that happens to you, think of the newborn giraffe. A heavenly Parent just may be preparing you, strengthening you, for an unknown future.

Life is full of the unexpected. None of us can be totally prepared for every eventuality, but it is important that we do all we can, anyway. *Life is so very fragile.* There are no guarantees of success or happiness or health for any of us. We need to be prepared for whatever may come our way. "Keep watch," Jesus said, "because you do not know the day or the hour."

The question that weaves throughout our Bible readings this morning is this: Are you prepared? Are you ready? Who knows what tomorrow may bring? Who knows what kind of severe test we might confront? Who knows what door of opportunity might open? Who knows if we might even have tomorrow? Are you prepared? Are you ready? In our Gospel reading, Jesus describes what should be a joyous event, a wedding celebration. *(the ten "virgins" can, and probably should, be translated as "bridesmaids" based on the context; the Greek word can be rendered both ways).* In that culture the customary role of these attendants was to light the way, to light the processional, from the bride's father's house as the new couple made their way to their new home. There at the new couple's home the joyous wedding banquet takes place after the bridal party arrives. All ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to await the bridegroom. But only five of the bridesmaids were sensible enough to prepare in case of delay; they brought enough oil to refill their lamps just in case. Sure enough, the bridegroom was delayed ... at midnight, they are all awakened by a shout. The Bridegroom is on his way, and the other five wound up having to run down to the 24-hour oil station to buy some more oil. Before they got back, though, the bridegroom had come, the five sensible bridesmaids were ready and waiting with their lamps lit, and on they processed to the festive wedding banquet, and the door was shut after they entered. The procession was over; the party began. When the "foolish five" return from their emergency oil-buying excursion, they have missed the whole reason they needed their lamps lit: the processional! They missed their moment. With the banquet already underway behind closed doors, these bridesmaids could no longer serve their purpose. They dropped the ball. They failed their "calling" and the joyous celebration they had anticipated is now taking place without them.

"Therefore keep watch," Jesus said, "because you do not know the day or the hour." Keep watch. Watch and be ready. Who knows what tomorrow may bring? Who knows what door of opportunity might open, and you might find yourself unable to walk through? Is there some unfinished business in your life that can be and needs to be taken care of? Who knows if we might even have tomorrow? Be ready! Be prepared, so that if there is just a 90% chance of tomorrow, and if you were to be part of that unfortunate 10%, you would have nothing to apologize for, you would have no regrets! Be prepared to be the best you can be, for you never know just who or what may come your way that day. Be prepared so if you were offered a wonderful opportunity, you would be ready to step into your new role. Be prepared so that if some tragedy occurred in your life, you would be faithful and strong enough to ride out the storm. And, as Paul intimates in our epistle reading, be prepared so that should you hear the shout of the archangel, "The Bridegroom is coming" and you hear that final trumpet ... which really could happen at any time ... that you can join the grand procession of all the faithful as the Bridegroom takes His bride, the Church, to their new eternal home. *(Just an aside about that trumpet ... this would take a sermon in itself, but to put it succinctly, Paul is using the imagery of a Roman victory parade; as the conquering army would return to Rome, the trumpet would blow and everyone in the surrounding countryside would simply drop what they were doing and run to become part of the parade, the grand victory processional. This passage isn't about some "rapture" snatching Christians away before the real troubles come ... no, there is only one final trumpet, announcing the triumphant return of the King of Kings once and for all).*

Thought to be written 18-20 years after Jesus' resurrection, 1 Thessalonians appears to be the earliest writing we have in the New Testament; no gospel had yet been written. If New Testament books were ordered according to when they were written, 1 Thessalonians would be first. Paul writes to encourage these young Christians, and from his very first words, the notion of Christ's final return saturates the pages. Jesus' triumphant return is the point to which all of life is moving. He will come. He will be victorious. There really may be a 90% chance of tomorrow, but there is a 100% chance of Jesus returning to this world. It *could* happen tonight, it could happen years or even centuries from now. By the way, that's not a threat; it is a promise. We wait not with fear, but with faith. The coming of our Bridegroom, the Lord, is something we look forward to. There is a trumpet waiting to be sounded that will mark the end of all sin, all sadness, all fear, all pain.

Until that day, Jesus says, our task is to be like those five wise young women who knew that, despite the delay, the bridegroom would be coming. Therefore, let us keep our store of lamp oil well supplied through our labors of love, exercising our gifts of faith, and nurturing our hope in the One coming at the last trumpet.