

BE PREPARED, BE ALERT, BE READY!
Sunday, November 9, 2008 – Grace Church, Haddonfield
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

It's November, and now we are coming to the end of the church year. The Scripture readings will talk about the end times. Herb O Driscoll says that these readings tell us what we were created for and how we are called to encounter God. How, what, where, and when do we experience God? It will come in many ways, and many times! We are told to be preparing to meet God. Be alert for God's coming. Be ready to meet Jesus at any time and in any place!

What sets the stage for all of this ... but the Gospel of Matthew. In it we hear about the wedding customs and practices in Jesus' day. Jesus uses the parable of the wise and foolish virgins to tell us something about how we are to be as we await the coming of the Kingdom of God. Back then; it was the custom to gather in the groom's hometown for the wedding. The unmarried women from both sides of the family gathered to await the groom and escort him in to his bride and the wedding feast. Once the groom arrived, the party started, and the doors were shut! No one would be allowed in after the doors closed.

Wow, have times changed! How many people wander in at all times to a wedding service in Church? There's no sense of decorum or being on time today. People chat on cell phones, bring in their coffee and sodas, walk right past the bride and bridal party as they prepare to come down the aisle! Can you imagine the outcry if we closed the doors to the church as soon as the service started! Imagine going to the reception and being denied entering because the bride and groom are already in the hall!

There's a deeper meaning here for Jesus when he shares the story. He uses it to call us to be watchful and to be prepared. First, we need to remember that our hope rests in Jesus. When he suggests something to us, it is the way for us to find our way into the grace and love of God. Jesus tells us to be alert! We never know when we might encounter God!

The question for us today is ... are we prepared to meet Jesus? Are we ready to encounter God? So often God appears in ordinary places and times, or when we least expect to encounter the Divine. I call these times God incidents or God moments. They happen more often than we think. Jesus asks are we paying attention? God promises to come. Jesus will call on us. We have the promise that God is coming. Are we doing anything like waiting for the coming of God?

There is a problem with us in today's world ... fear. It makes us forget that there is hope. It blinds us to the presence and love of God. We find ourselves caught up in anxiety and worry over jobs, the economy, the stock market, our retirement funds and college savings. These are not new problems ... they have happened before. (Remember 1929 or 1987?) There's another reality we have to come to grips with ... we have limited time on earth. How much of it is wasted caught up in fear, anxiety and worry? How often have we missed the blessings and gifts that God offers because our focus and attention are elsewhere?

We have choices. We can live in fear, or we can live in hope. If we choose to let fear reign in our lives, we will come up short. We risk finding ourselves locked out of the Kingdom of

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God! If we choose to live with hope, then we can prepare for the coming of the Kingdom ... and we are more likely to see God's presence in our lives!

It's time for us to get motivated. We can prepare to meet God by prayers, study, the sacraments, living in a faith community, and reaching out to others in love. It's easier to live in the sense of hope rather than fear. Hope is life giving. Fear is death giving. Many things come to mind for me when I think about our being alert, prepared and looking for God.

One person comes to mind that I met when I served in Montclair. Her name was Karen. She had a son my daughter, Jennifer's age. Karen taught me about making the most of each day. You see ... Karen had AIDS. It was the mid 80's and not many people knew much about AIDS. Karen got it from her boyfriend that neglected to tell her he was an intravenous drug user. Karen called the relationship off, and learned a year later that he had died. A couple of years later ... she became sick. Karen worked for an executive with a drug firm in North Jersey. She was fired. Karen suffered the embarrassment of losing her job, having to go on welfare and food stamps, and live in public housing. In the midst of this, I remember her telling me her new philosophy of life: "Every day I wake up is a gift from God ... and I must do good with it." Karen understood that life was fragile and that tomorrow may never come.

A more recent example comes to mind. The Diocese asked me to help St. Wilfrid's in Camden open a free medical clinic in their church. The first meeting I called I expected 2 or 3 people from the parish. More than 20 showed up! Ruthann Johnson helped me connect with Lourdes Hospital, who is excited about being a sponsor for the program! Nurses from our neighbor across the street at First Presbyterian want to help! Marty Rosica e-mailed me a week ago with an idea. He wants to organize people from the parish to help do repair work at local churches. St. Wilfrid's will need work to host the clinic. He asked me if I knew any churches that we could work with ... coincidence? Not in your life! Who did I meet in the parish hall today stuffing lunch bags for Kids' Alley Café? Ruthann and Marty! God has a wonderful way of meeting us in unexpected ways at unexpected times!

We are challenged today to prepare for God's coming amongst. The earliest Christians believed that Jesus would be back anytime! Are we prepared to meet and greet him? We may not always be ready, that's why it helps to be in a faith community that we remind us of our hope in Jesus and to be alert. The church can help us to watch and prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

I will end with a story I came across that talks about meeting God in unexpected ways (Sermonwriter). A man was converted to Christ through the Salvation Army. He was a simple man. Neither he nor his wife could read or write. The man worshipped regularly at the Salvation Army. But one day he came home looking glum. His wife asked what was wrong and he said, "All the people in the Salvation Army have red sweaters, and I don't have one." His wife said, "I'll knit one!" And she proceeded to do that.

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The next Sunday, the man went to worship dressed in his red sweater. But he came home looking glum once again. His wife asked what was wrong, and he said, “I just noticed that all their red sweaters have yellow writing. Neither the man nor woman could read or write. They had no idea what the yellow writing on the red sweaters of the Salvation Army meant. The Army symbol is a yellow eight-pointed star with the words “Blood & Fire.” But the man didn’t understand that. He just knew that there was a yellow symbol on the sweaters and he wanted one on his.

His wife agreed to embroider some yellow writing on his sweater. She had no idea what the letters should say or how they should look. She walked downtown and looked in store windows. She found writing on one of the windows that didn’t have too many letters. She thought she could copy those letters onto her husband’s sweater. The wife wrote down the letters exactly as she found them in the store window and went home to embroider the letters onto her husband’s sweater.

The next Sunday, the man went to Church again. When he came home, his wife asked if people liked his sweater. He told her that they loved his sweater. In fact, some of them said they liked his sweater better than their own. So what was it that the wife copied from the store window? What was it that she embroidered on the sweater? It’s this: “Under New Management!” That’s what the sign in the window said and that’s what the wife put on her husband’s sweater!

This is what it means to be a Christian. This is what means to get ready to meet Jesus and God face-to-face. We need to embrace hope rather than fear, being alert rather than anxiety, looking for God rather than worrying. We would do best to put our lives under Christ’s management ... so that we might be under new management. So, are we looking for God? Are we ready to meet Jesus when he comes again? What do you think?