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Date: May 3, 2020
Sermon Title: "Be Prepared"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Scriptures, read responsively

"Be Prepared"

Leader: *"John the Baptist came preaching 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.' He was the person spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"*
(Matt. 3:1-3)

People: *"One day, Jesus had been teaching a large crowd all day, and they were hungry. The disciples wanted the crowd sent home hungry. But Jesus said, "'Show me what you have.' They brought a boy to him with five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus told the disciples to have the crowd of 5,000 sit down on the grass in groups of 50 and 100. After Jesus prayed and gave thanks, they shared the bread and fish. Afterward the disciples collected 12 baskets of leftovers."*
(from the four Gospels)

Leader: *"As they approached Jerusalem [for what would become known as Palm Sunday], Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead to check on preparation. Jesus told them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone asks, tell them the Lord needs them, and they will send them right away.'"*
(Matt. 21:1-3)

People: *"[During Holy Week, just before what Christians now call the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday], the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for you to have the Passover Meal?' [It took a lot of preparation ahead of time to have a Passover Seder for a large group of visitors in a city]. Jesus replied, 'Go into the city, and you will find a man carrying a jar of water who will meet you. Follow him to the house he enters, and the owner will show you a large upper room, furnished. Make preparations there.'"*
(Luke 22:7-12)

Our Scripture litany is a string of stories, mostly about Jesus, that show how prepared he was. You may think that since he's the Messiah, the Son of God, all he had to do was get up each morning, snap his fingers, and everything went along smoothly. Instead, we see Jesus getting prepared, looking ahead, putting things in place to get the desired outcome. Right down to having a donkey ready for the parade into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

And think about Jesus's Last Supper, a Jewish Passover meal. How did thirteen men from out of town plus another eight or 10 friends of theirs, with no headquarters, end up with all the intricacies and delicacies of the Passover meal? Not only a place to have it, but also enough wine, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, salt water, lamb—all of that bought, cooked, prepared, ready? Jesus thought ahead, made preparations, got it done successfully. It's now probably the most famous meal in all of human history, thanks to Jesus being prepared.

To be prepared gets drilled into us from early childhood. As you head off to nursery school or kindergarten, it's always asked, "Have you got your backpack, your lunch, your mittens, your permission slip?" As we advance in school, are we prepared for class, our homework done, got our books? When we play sports, do we have everything: mouth guard, glove, bat, lacrosse stick? When you grow up in life, go off to college, get a job, buy a house, have a family, are you prepared? Do you have the skill set? Do you have business attire? Are you prepared for interviews, presentations?

Eventually, we think about profound preparations: life insurance, wills, end-of-life decisions. Are you "ready to meet your maker"? Those are all levels of being prepared. And, of course, our response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been all about preparation: How do we prepare for it? And after it? I realize that the feel-good "we're all in this together" spirit seems already to be fracturing. On Tuesday, I was listening to two New York City radio talk show guys, New Yorkers, from New York, making a nice living off of New York. And they declared repeatedly, loudly, with specificity, "I hate New York, I hate New Yorkers!" Yup, that's the spirit!

But in all honesty, and I'm an amateur at this, not a scientist or a businessman or a logistician, but I'm frankly quite impressed how quickly Americans went from the free-wheeling, wide-open "anything goes" society to wearing masks, staying apart, sanitizing and washing, doing without favorite activities. And the end result has been rather successful. While horrified by the premature deaths of 65,000 Americans, we have escaped the most dire predictions of our best minds, not because they were wrong, but because we dared to be ready, we dared to make sacrifices.

The Wall Street Journal had a lovely article titled "Habits of Kindness That Will Endure." The author notes, "Kindness can also decrease our stress and soothe us in moments of great pain." And then he quotes "the psychologist and Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl, [who] wrote: 'Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.'" That may seem a subtle difference, but it's pretty big. "Suffering ceases to be suffering when it finds a meaning . . . such as the meaning of sacrifice." (Zaki, Jamil. "Habits of Kindness That Will Endure. *The Wall Street Journal*. March 28, 2020. p.C6. Print.)

We think of sacrifice as noble, heroic. If you walk through the main old campus of Yale, you'll come across a statue of Nathan Hale, a Connecticut boy who spied for America during the Revolutionary War, was caught, and executed. Before his death he declared, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." That's an impressive statement from a 21-year-old, offering up his life as a sacrifice. Did you know that Nathan Hale is officially our "State Hero"?

In that spirit, it's fair to call our behaviors of the last 50 days genuine sacrifices. We've sacrificed not only pleasure and convenience, but we've also risked personal freedoms, national economy, our own security, stability. And we did all that for one another. We've done this as an investment in one another's health and our future, at no small cost. It was a gamble, and we may not know the payout yet, but we did it for a meaning, a purpose, that allows our suffering to be known as sacrifice, and I'm not talking about government or state or politics or the C.D.C. or W.H.O. I'm talking about us, just folks, you and me, doing the best we can with the knowledge we have and the opportunities presented to us. We stepped up, got prepped, and have done our best.

Now comes the good part, the payout for the gamble, the days, months ahead. Our tomorrow. Are we prepared for tomorrows? Everybody you know is trying to figure that out, whether you're young, just getting started, at the top of your career, or retired; whether you're a student or a teacher, a boss or an employee; whether you're a buyer or seller. If you own a restaurant or just like your favorite restaurant, what is the best tomorrow, and how do we get there? Our Church is full of healthcare workers, full of teachers, full of finance folks and business owners, travelers and golfers and stay-at-home parents. We're full of the breadth of America. And all wanting to be prepared for tomorrow.

Jesus's life is instructive on this. Jesus constantly expects a good outcome from his effort. Jesus anticipates a tomorrow well worth planning for and counting on. That's part of what separates Jesus out from the rest of the good guys in the Bible. Abraham was a good guy; Moses, the disciples, all good guys. And at one time or another they all gave in to the "woe is me" pessimism.

I don't have time to go into all their stories today. If a pandemic live-streaming YouTube-watching Church service has taught me anything it's how short our attention spans are, how easy it is to move that mouse to something else, so we're preaching shorter! Wait! Is that a "hallelujah" I hear from computer screens and kitchens all across America?

So, no. No in-depth stories today. But my quick versions still make the point. When the good guy Abraham got into a pickle, things looked tough, the future uncertain, he hid behind his wife's skirts. Almost literally.

When God got Moses and the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, they lost heart over and over again, complaining, whining. To the point where, when God delivered them to the entrance to the Promised Land, to a place they saw first-hand was perfect, they let their fears take over, and they ran away.

The disciples? Despite three years of front-row seats for everything Jesus said and did and stood for, despite all of Jesus's promises and miracles, they didn't get it—not before he died, and not after.

Jesus, on the other hand, always lets his faith carry him forward into the future. In his short ministry, he was met by opposition from the most powerful, by diseases that were daunting, by needy people with urgent needs; by people who were overwhelmed by life, defeated, at wits' end; by people literally quarantined, from mental illness, physical illness, social stigma, blind prejudice, flat-out ignorance.

He could have stayed in Nazareth, worked as a carpenter, been liked around town, been safe. Instead, Jesus stood tall in the middle of his own time's pandemic: a pandemic of injustice, a pandemic of poverty, a pandemic of sickness. And Jesus saw clear to the other side. His Easter resurrection was his clarion call from that other side, "Come on, you can make it!"

I like to read obituaries. They're sort of a walk through history. In *The New York Times*, I read of William Helmreich, most famous for his book, *The New York Nobody Knows*. He knew New York because he set out to walk every block in the city. You heard that right! Every block, all 121,000 blocks, 6,163 miles, stopping and chatting with people along the way. I've got to read that book. But his other famous book is for today, *Against All Odds*, based on his interviews with 380 Holocaust survivors, survivors of a pandemic of hatred that swept across the world not that long ago, a virus that still returns all too often.

Perhaps like me, the author assumed these survivors would be depressed, grim, warped in some way, their whole lives numb. Instead, he found them as a group remarkably stable and successful in life, marriage, and work. How? Why? He said

it was because of three traits: adaptability, tenacity, and resourcefulness. Adaptability. Tenacity. Resourcefulness.

Adaptability: yeah, things change. Deal with it.

Tenacity: hang on for dear life. Not quit.

Resourcefulness: There's more than one way to deal with anything.

We've seen a lot of that already. Alida visited a distillery in Bridgeport that switched from making vodka to hand sanitizer. Our own Council of Churches won a contract to use its own catering ministry to feed thousands of children.

Or, look at you, comfy in your own home, sitting there in your PJs with a cup of coffee doing Church! Truth is, the month ahead will put those three traits to hard work. There will be a lot of shaking out happening in business, in education, in lifestyle, in fun times. Will baseball endure? Your favorite restaurant? Your company? Your college? Broadway?

As you and I get prepared, those three traits are a good foundation to build on: to get prepared mentally, physically, yes, spiritually, to BE tenacious, adaptable, resourceful.

Well, David, how the heck do you do that? Isn't there some old saying from Rudyard Kipling that says "Keep your head while all those around you are losing theirs"? You start with faith. Faith in yourself. Faith in God. And faith in those you love. That's a good team. Believe in yourself. Believe in your God. Believe in your loved ones. That takes the panic out of tomorrow, and the fear.

I belong to this group called "Red Letter Christians." Many of you know that in a lot of Bibles all the words of Jesus are in red ink. If he said it, it's red. So we call ourselves "Red Letter Christians." And those red letters and red sentences are our go-to guide. Every morning I get a "wake-up verse" from them, and on Tuesday it was one of Jesus's Easter sayings. It read, "Jesus came to the disciples and stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" (John 21:19) Two things were true about that moment. First, Jesus wasn't saying the road ahead is easy, BUT, second, Jesus was saying that the worst is over.

That's how we prepare for tomorrow. The peace that comes with faith keeps panic and fear away. Thanks to the sacrifices we've made, the worst can be over. With God at our side, and one another, we are ready to be tenacious, resourceful, adaptable.

We are ready.