

Let us Be Ready

“We know neither the day nor the hour.” “The day will be a day of wrath.” “The Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Our master will return without warning from his journey.

From the prophecies of the Old Testament, to Paul's Epistles, to the Gospels, to Revelation, scripture reveals that the day of the Lord's return will be an end-of-time event that will bring judgment to the wicked and deliver the faithful. This event has been a source of fascination over the ages, with many predictions about the timing of Christ's return. To highlight a few:

Pope Sylvester the Second predicted the end of the world would occur one thousand years after Jesus' death, in January 1000. Mathematician Michael Stifel calculated that judgment day would begin precisely at 8:00 a.m. on October 19, 1533. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, surmised the end times would occur between the years of 1058 and 1836. Physicist Isaac Newton suggested Christ would return in the year 2000. In 1999, popular televangelist Jerry Falwell predicted the Second Coming would occur within 10 years. And in 2014, USA Today reported on The Blood Moon Prophecy that Christ's return would correspond with the September 28, 2015 lunar eclipse.

Here we are in 2020. From a global pandemic that has killed more than a million, to the destructive forces of wildfires, earthquakes and hurricanes, to family

relationships splintered over political beliefs, the Year of 2020 might be enough to convince some we are closing in on the end of time. Our nation is wracked by fear, anxiety and discontent, and is more divided perhaps more than any time in history. In a world filled with such suffering and pain, it's not easy being the Church. On some days, being the light in the darkness seems an insurmountable task.

Thankfully, today's Epistle and Gospel both offer guidance on how we're to prepare for the coming of our Lord. Last week, Father Manny pointed out that this day of judgment will not be pretty; it will not be easy. We know we can expect great suffering.

How do we prepare for an event without knowing its timing? Paul's letter to the Thessalonians suggests that it's less about figuring out when and exactly what will happen, or bemoaning the dark seasons we find ourselves in. Paul focuses instead on our *readiness* for this day. He speaks of preparing for battle: "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

Faith, hope and love. Sounds simple enough, yes?

Renowned theologian and author Richard Rohr says:

Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. We often give a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep

transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of "Christian" countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else—and often more so.

Rohr's reference to "Fast-food religion" speaks of Christian faith that lacks substance. Faith that lacks sacrifice—faith devoid of the spiritual transformation required to build God's kingdom. This faith is *not* the battle armor Paul speaks of.

For we know from today's Gospel that building the kingdom requires sacrifice. And sacrifice carries risk. The ugliness we confront across our nation today begs the question: What are we willing to risk? What exactly are we willing to sacrifice to build the kingdom? Ego? Control? Stability? Status quo?

Sacrifice is not a popular notion in today's world. But as disciples of Christ, we are not like everyone else. Our identity is tied not to political parties or social constructs, but to our belief in Christ. We cast our eyes not on worldly prizes but on heavenly ones. As Children of the Light—we good and trustworthy servants are called to cut through the ugliness, and focus on the work of building God's kingdom. And Paul gives us a step-by-step guide for doing this, even in the darkest hours: keep awake, be sober, engage our spiritual armor.

As the Body of Christ, we are living beacons of light in a world of darkness. Times and seasons will shift, but our enduring task is to be ready, by staying focused on the truth and security of our identity as believers in Christ. We are

children of the day. Our spiritual armor is faith, hope and love. We live out our faith in community, we hope for Salvation through Christ, we love as Christ loved us.

Can it be that simple? Can we block out the noise, deny the distractions and demands of the world—and hone in on our identity as Children of the Light?

I believe it is that simple; but it isn't easy. This is why Paul specifically tells us to *build each other up, to encourage each other*. Salvation is not an individual experience. It's a community experience. We may have personal relationships with our Lord and Savior, but our faith is lived out in community. And as the body of Christ, we are only as strong as our weakest members, only as joyful as those most suffering, only as healthy as those most wounded. And so, we must build each other up.

Our model for how to ready ourselves for Jesus' return is revealed in the life of Jesus himself. The Jesus who ate with sinners, who befriended prostitutes, who healed lepers, who welcomed outsiders. The Jesus who tells us to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who mistreat us. The Jesus who teaches *radical* hospitality and inclusiveness. The Jesus who modeled the ultimate self-sacrifice, in succumbing to the cross.

Our sacrifice will never be that great. But as followers of Jesus, we *are called* to risk and to sacrifice, nonetheless—of ourselves, of our egos, of our preconceived notions. We are called to reach across divides—to live in

relationship with one another, as if we believe the end of time will happen tomorrow.

Author and theologian Henri Nouwen noted, “In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.”

Brothers and sisters, we have a choice. We can hide our talents, horde our gifts, erect walls and fences, and isolate ourselves from those who disagree with us. We can choose a fast-food version of the Gospel. Or, we can lean into our privileged vocation as living signs of love in a world that desperately needs to feel God’s love. We can choose to sacrifice transformatively, focusing our energies on bridging divisions and healing wounds—and on building each other up to do the work God has called us to.

Every morning we can wake up and choose faith, hope and love, knowing we don’t have to do this alone. For when the armor seems too heavy to lift and put on ourselves, we can turn to our brothers and sisters in Christ, to help us. In building each other up, we share each other’s pain, joys, and anxieties, knowing that as good and trustworthy servants, whenever the day or hour comes, we can rest assured that *we are ready*—ready to hear “Well done!”—and to enter into the joy of God’s heavenly kingdom.