

Being Ready for the Unexpected 26 Pentecost A

Are you ready for the unexpected? If you're a bear, you get to hibernate. You do nothing but sleep for four months or more. That's one way to deal with the unknown.

Before you hibernate, you're supposed to eat yourself stupid. I could deal with that!

If you're a mama bear, everyone knows you mean business. You swat anyone who bothers your cubs. If your cubs get out of line, you swat them, too. So everyone leaves you in peace.

If you're a bear, your mate EXPECTS you to wake up growling. Your mate EXPECTS that you will have hairy legs and excess body fat.

Some people wanna be a bear. I can see why. No one bothers them to exercise and while they sleep their heart rate goes down to six beats a minute yet they can burn 4,000 calories a day! And when they wake up from their power nap, they have the ability to emerge faster and stronger at *almost the same level of physical strength and stamina* as when they started their season-skipping siesta. Through daily regimens of muscle stimulation and contraction, bears are able to both maintain their constant body temperature and keep their massive muscles in working shape. Four months off and you're good as new. Now that's a power nap!

Scientists may one day be able to apply the regenerative qualities of hibernation to sick patients. While the deep sleep of hibernation is great for bears and may one day impact medical therapy, not all slumber is equally beneficial.

In the gospel if you fall asleep on Jesus, you may not emerge feeling so rested and refreshed. Jesus parable of the ten bridesmaids addresses our need to be ready for the unexpected. He tells the story about a bridegroom that is holding a comin' out party for the most eligible bachelor. Ten bridesmaids go out to meet this bachelor but he delays his arrival and the gals decide to get a room at the local Holiday Inn Express. They all go down for a nap. The point is not that they sleep... for all ten do; but that only five woke up in time and were ready to go in the middle of the night and feast. Jesus is warning against bad kingdom catnaps; hibernating without remaining strong and ready to go.

So what are the lessons for the drowsy today?

We need to get pretty and party worthy! We need to ask God if we are acting un-bear-like – not being fully charged spiritually to be ready for the bridegroom. Though we may find Him delaying His return after 2000 years, have we figured He is not coming again as He promised? His second coming could happen on a day we least expect and in an hour when we are not awake. Winter *will* change to spring, and then there will be no more time for sleeping.

Another day goes by and we assume Jesus has not come. Maybe you're thinking there have been no apocalyptic fireworks, no trumpets sounding, and no clouds parting. No angels shouting. No pileups on the freeways. No airplanes tumbling out of the skies. None of that.

But here's the deal: Jesus did come today, and it's possible we were so asleep that we didn't notice, and if we were awake, our lamps were so dim that we couldn't see Him.

Jesus was here today. Jesus was here yesterday. And Jesus is going to be here tomorrow.

So where will we find Him? In the work He has given us to do. There are needs all around us to fill. Just ask the United Way or ECHO or our Sunday School, or our vestry. Ask our office manager, Jeanette, about the times she could use your help. But if we're lazy, if we're sleepy, if we've lost muscle tone — our chances are slim that we'll ever see Jesus.

How ready are we for Jesus' return?

Can we awake during this delay prepared to meet Him, or must we still scramble to get the oil needed to keep our lamps burning? Putting our spiritual lives in order is not something to be put off till a later day. The day to be ready for the bridegroom is today and not tomorrow.

So what is the oil we are short of? How might we scramble around to get ready for Christ's banquet?

Keep the oil flowing! Oil in Scripture is often a symbol for the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we try to spring into action without submitting our work, our intentions, and our purpose to the Holy Spirit, so that God's Spirit can fill our deeds with power and effectiveness.

Or perhaps we're short of the oil of kindness and compassion. There's no way we're ready to meet Jesus in the person of the unloved and unfortunate if we are lacking the essential oils of compassion and mercy.

Perhaps we're short of the oil of patience and long-suffering. Without such oil, we're ill-equipped to deal with Jesus who comes to us in the form of a person who needs long-term love, extensive patience and guidance.

Perhaps we're short of the oil of education and instruction. Perhaps God is calling us to take our expertise and skills to another level in order to more adequately meet Jesus when he comes to us. Lay persons from parishes came together this weekend to be trained as leaders through the Church Development Institute. With up to four scholarships per church it is exciting to see young adults and older adults get prepared to lead the church.

To be prepared for the party, we're to trim our lamps daily. In hindsight, all 10 virgins should have had oil ready on that evening, and the five who didn't, would lament about just how unsatisfying the unprepared life really can be.

Finally, there is a somber ending to this warning against slumber. The opportunity to be included as a member of God's kingdom eventually comes to an end. That is why the previous lesson of being prepared has such import.

But aren't we used to plenty of second chances? Kids cry out "do-overs" if they

don't like the outcome of a game played with friends. High-school students can retake the SAT to improve their scores. The delete key on our computers quickly offers the chance to fix mistakes. In fact, the love and grace of God offer plenty of second chances ... even seven times 70 chances, if necessary.

But there is an eventual end point at which these second chances are no more. Lazarus knew it. One of the thieves on the cross knew it. And Jesus obviously knew it as well (25:11-12). When the bridegroom does return, the opportunities to prepare for him are no longer presented.

Jesus sounds a loving warning: "Live a spiritual life that is *already* prepared for my return." Let's go to God and seek out the oil we need. Let's find our rest in Him and His strength so we can be bear-like and go out knowing that His invitation to the party is real and will one day be here before we know it.

AMEN.