

Sermon Transcript

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-15 and Matthew 25:1-13 | November 12, 2023 | Twenty Fourth Sunday After Pentecost | Pastor John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to my friends in Christ,

My final exam to become a branch qualified chaplain required a grueling Capstone event out in the field.

The whole summer, the course leaders were preparing us for this test.

All 80 plus chaplains and chaplain candidates hiked out to the site and then we would be put through lanes to test our ability to provide religious care or advise our commanders, or leaders, on the mission.

Everything was graded and you had to pass everything. If you failed the first time, you'd get one more chance, otherwise—you'd be sent home and be "recycled" to return to re-take the final three weeks of the course to hopefully pass the next time.

It was a lot of pressure without much guidance on what to expect. We had an idea on what some of the lanes were going to test on, but no clue on the scenarios or how we'd be tested.

The first test started when we arrived at the base camp. We were arranged in formation and told to set our packs down. We would be doing a layout—did we have every single item on our packing list?

Chaplain Reed, who was one of my friends and peers, was my squad leader. He had to verify that all 7 of us in the squad had each item as they listed it off.

This was a formality. After 12 weeks, everyone there knew what to do.

As the Sergeant First Class yelled out the items, Chaplain Reed paused as I pointed at the called item. He whispered, "No, where's your sleeping pad?"

I told him, "this is my sleeping pad."

"That's not a sleeping pad, that's a bivy cover."

I looked at him, I must've looked white as a ghost. I explained that these were the supplies that were checked out to me and it was an honest mistake, I thought this was the sleeping pad.

"I really hate to do this, John, but I have to report up the chain of command because if the instructors check again, it would come back on me for not saying something," he said.

I told him I completely understood—I knew he had to do what he was assigned to do.

I hadn't been there the first four weeks when this mistake would have been caught during the initial layouts. I didn't have to do one prior to Capstone, so I believed I had everything on the list.

Unfortunately, I didn't have someone else look over my stuff and make sure I was right.

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I couldn't run back to my room and get the right equipment. I was unprepared. I would accept the consequences, even if that meant I was sent home.

The consequences for being unprepared according to the parable we just heard should give me pause. Jesus tells this story in Matthew 25 and it's towards the end of the journey—he's about to be arrested and killed. For those around him, his closest followers and all who believed in him, it was too late to "get ready."

It was time. If you weren't all in, you were gonna miss out.

Like Judas, who wasn't all in.

Or like many of the Pharisees, Sadducees, the chief priests and the scribes. They've listened, but they're not ready to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Susan Hylan, a New Testament professor at Emory, had a helpful explanation of what this illustration is all about.

"The point of the parable is not constant readiness. "Keep awake" does not imply that the disciples should never sleep, standing vigil through the ages for Christ's imminent return. In fact, all of the bridesmaids, wise and foolish, are asleep when the shout announces the groom's approach.

Hylan continues: "The wise or prudent disciple is the one who prepares not only for the groom's return, but also for his delay. If the groom was coming quickly there would be nothing wrong with taking one's lamp full of oil to meet him. But the wise disciple packs a supply of oil, knowing that her wait may be unpredictable."

We can be forgiven if our sense of urgency in the year 2023 has waned. The first disciples anticipated a day when Christ would come again in their lifetime.

When, after a few generations that didn't happen, the church began to ponder what Jesus meant—and honestly, how are we to live.

"The wise bridesmaids keep the vision of Christ's return, and all that it stands for, alive through their faithful waiting in the midst of delay," Susan Hylan. "By preparing for the day, the timing of which no one knows but God, they proclaim that God's promises are true. They act out their hope for that day when God will establish justice and righteousness and peace."

What Jesus is implying in this parable is that the wise bridesmaids are ready like Joshua, who says:

"As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

This isn't new information. This isn't something that the people are hearing for the first time. This is his farewell speech.

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Kathryn Schifferdecker says Joshua is telling them to “**Re-commit to God and that faith and teach it to your children. Live by the covenant that the LORD made with you.**”

We need to not rely on the faith of our parents, our grandparents, we ourselves, in each generation need to re-new that covenant and re-commit ourselves to that faith and to re-commit to passing it on to the next generation.” Kathryn Schifferdecker.

Our ability to re-commit isn’t that different from how I encouraged the kids to be ready. Re-committing to God is about that daily reminder of gratefulness and thanks.

Re-committing to God is about prayers where we sit and listen—absorbing the quiet. Sometimes waiting and waiting for a return.

Re-committing to God is reading our Bibles and participating in church—in worship, in service, and in fellowship.

Re-committing to God is not about being perfect and having everything figured out. It’s about pointing to God and trusting that, even in our mistakes, God will have our back.

After failing my packing list inspection, I explained my situation to the class leader, but then moved onto the rest of the events.

I passed each lane on the first try—some were easier than others. Everyone in the class passed, although there were some who had to repeat a lane or two.

By the end of Capstone, I had an entire sheet of paper with signatures of instructors with each spot filled in.

Except one little space on the bottom.

You see, the ironic thing about the trip was that I didn’t use much of what I packed. It was too hot for a sleeping bag. The item I thought was a sleeping pad is actually what I slept on—as a sleeping pad.

When it was time to turn in our completed sheets, my Small Group Leader, Major Grace Kim, called me over. She pointed at the blank space and asked me why I was unprepared?

I told her what happened.

She looked at me and said, “packing the right things is important. If you are in a deployed environment, you can’t go back and get something. You need to plan and be prepared.”

I nodded.

Then, she grabbed my paper and pulled out her pen. She scribbled her name on it—literally writing “Grace”, her name, (**SIGNATURE**) in the place I needed grace the most.

Do you think I learned a lesson? I was forgiven. I got to do the 6 mile march back to school at 2 in the morning—**here’s a picture of all of us**, I’m hiding somewhere way in the back.



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My mistake didn't cost me, but it definitely showed me the importance of being prepared. If I don't know what something is, I learned that it matters to find out the answer.

I got a lesson in re-committing to being ready.

Like having our hats, gloves, and coats when winter comes, Jesus tells us to be ready. The promises of Christ, won on the cross, are not ranked.

Turn to God and everything else falls into place. SLIDE: **God's righteousness, given for you on the cross by Jesus?** That has the word of **grace** (signature) written all over it. Amen.