

"ON BEING PREPARED"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 31st, 1993

"ON BEING PREPARED"

INTRODUCTION

Sometime back, someone told a story that was poking a bit of fun at Russia, but it could be aimed at many of us.

It seems that the United States, Japan and Russia each selected their best astronaut to participate in a joint two year mission up there in space. At a pre-launch briefing, these three astronauts were told that they could take anything with them as long as it didn't weigh more than 125 pounds.

The American said, "I'd like to take my wife...she only weighs 112 pounds". The officials nodded and said that was fine. "I've always wanted to learn Greek" said the Japanese astronaut, "And I'd like to take along 125 pounds of books to teach myself the Greek language". No problem. His request was also approved. "We'll be gone so long" said the Russian, "That I want to take 125 pounds of the best Havana cigars with me". His request was also approved.

Two years later the astronauts returned to Earth. The American stepped out of the spaceship holding an infant in each arm and the crowd roared its approval! Next came the Japanese astronaut and he went to the microphone and spoke to the world in flawless Greek. Again, there was a roar of approval. Then the Russian stepped out and his mouth was turned down and his teeth were clenched on the end of a cigar. Stepping up to the microphone he said rather sheepishly, "Would anybody have a match?"

DEVELOPMENT

At one time or another we've all found ourselves in an unpleasant situation because we were not adequately prepared, because we weren't thinking ahead...with cigars on the moon and matches back home on earth.

Sometime back, in a true-life situation, one of our astronauts was asked by the press before a moon mission,

"What is the most dangerous part of this flight?" to which he answered, "That part which we have overlooked in our preparations."

The motto of the Boy Scouts is an excellent motto for life's long journey. Let's think about it. "Be Prepared". And turn to the Gospel of Matthew again for our launching pad for this message.

Here in the twenty-fifth chapter Jesus tells a story about some young women who were not prepared. He starts out by telling us about a certain young lady who was getting married and she had selected ten of her friends to escort the bridegroom, her future husband, in for the festivities. It was nighttime and so the young women brought lanterns. For some unknown reason, the bridegroom got delayed. We don't know what caused it. Perhaps he got caught in traffic or maybe he had a flat tire. Or he may have been so excited that he forgot the rings and went back to get them. It happens. Whatever the cause, he was delayed and one by one the lanterns of the young ladies started to run out of oil. Five of them were prepared; they had brought extra oil. Five were not prepared and they began to search frantically for a store that would still be open in order to purchase more oil. But by the time they returned to the wedding hall, the doors were shut. The ceremony had begun. They were left out.

PREPARATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Now, what are some of the lessons to be learned from this delightful story of the Ten Virgins. As you may recall from your days of Bible study, that's what it is called.

One of the first lessons and perhaps the most obvious one is that preparation makes a difference; indeed, it is often the difference between success and failure. Preparation is the key and this holds true in just about every area of life. It's one of the hardest and one of the most important lessons that life teaches us.

I was reading an article about Nolan Ryan last month in which he shares the secret of his longevity, of the hours and hours of workout. He spends or did spend until his retirement this Fall about five hours on the track or in the weight room or some other form of strenuous endeavor. People were often amazed to see him on an exercise bicycle immediately after a game while his arm was being iced. Nolan Ryan's daily routine of exercise might sound a bit boring to most of us and it might seem like a waste of time, but he said it was necessary if he was to be at the peak of condition every time he went out on the mound. He wanted to "be ready" every time his number was called!

Athletes know the importance of preparation and conditioning. They say the most difficult event of the Olympic games is probably the decathlon. Decathletes must be in the very best of physical condition. The mental preparation is the hardest part of this event. Without a well-trained mental approach, the most physically fit man would surely fail the decathlon. There are a lot of gifted athletes who could probably do the event physically, but can they do it when called to do it? The trick is to be able to do each event when it's your turn to do them.

Preparation is the key.

Certain actors go to extraordinary lengths to prepare for a role. I think it was Tom Cruise who said that he spent months in an Air Force fighter cockpit learning to be a pilot for the movie, Top Gun. Is that right? I don't remember seeing it, but I did see Sophie's Choice and know that Meryl Streep learned to speak Polish to perfect her accent for the title role.

The dedicated teacher goes over his or her teaching plan until he or she has it right, and the musician plays the scale for the 10,000th time, and the physician reads the latest reports in the journals, the business person checks the inventory closely knowing that running out of a product may very well cost him a customer. Preparation is the key to success or failure in most of life's ventures. It is the difference between enjoying the wedding party and being left out in the dark and who wants that?

LIFE IS UNPREDICTABLE

Now, having said all of this, we must confess that one of the most frustrating things about life is its unpredictability. In other words, how do you prepare when you have no idea of what's coming or when? How does one prepare for a future that one cannot see?

A hundred years ago at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the American Press Association asked 74 social commentators to look a century into the future. Would you like to hear some of their predictions? Maybe not, but here they are:

"Prisons and poorhouses will decline and divorce will not be considered necessary"

"By the end of the 20th century, taxation will be reduced to a minimum, the entire world will be open to trade and there will be no need of a standing army"

And hear my favorite,

"In 1993 the government will have grown more simple, as true greatness always tends toward simplicity."

Sure, for as Will Rogers once said,

"Let's just be thankful we're not getting all the government that we're paying for."

I suppose we shouldn't poke fun at these prognosticators. My point is that life is unpredictable. Who knows what will happen next?

The entire nation was shocked this summer at the senseless death of James Jordan, father of Michael Jordan. There's no security anymore, even when you've got everything going for you as James Jordan certainly did. We're all vulnerable. Not only to crime, for it could have been a heart attack or an automobile accident. You could have been visiting the World Trade Center last February the day the bomb exploded. Life is uncertain and one often wonders how one prepares for such unpredictable tragedies.

For many of us, it could be being laid off from our job. It's happening all around us as companies become leaner and meaner. Even those who have jobs worry about health care and shrinking pensions. Adjusted for inflation, the average worker in this country actually lost money over the past twenty years. Some figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that the average American worker in private industry made \$187 a week in 1970. Today the same worker makes about \$167 - a loss of \$20 a week in twenty years.

Many people are in a state of shock after all, this is America. And things are supposed to be getting better and better. I read this past week that if you have only a high school education, the picture is even scarier. In 1973, there was a 15 percent gap in pay between a thirty-year old male high school graduate and a thirty-year old male college graduate. By 1989, the gap was 50 percent, not because the college graduate's pay had gone up, but because the high school graduate's pay had gone down.

Are you prepared to live in such a world? Do you have what it takes to deal with a society that is ever less secure? I'm sure that if the young women in this parable of Jesus had known that the bridegroom would be delayed, that they would have brought along more oil. But they were caught off-guard.

PREPARATION IS MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER BEFORE

up which this parable suggests. And that is because life is so unpredictable, preparation is more essential than ever before. And failure on our part to prepare may have tragic consequences.

And, this brings us to the final point I wish to lift

It was on Thursday, August the 13th, back in the summer of 1992 that David Kaplan, a producer for ABC News was shot while on assignment in Bosnia. There were a couple of alarming facts about his death. Let me share them with you. For one thing, the correspondents who had arrived to cover the news in Bosnia were to be transported in an armored vehicle, but David Kaplan refused and chose to ride in an unprotected jeep. Another thing. All journalists were to wear a bulletproof vest for protection. David Kaplan did not have his on at the time. Reports showed that there had been no sniper fire that morning. And the chances were that everything would be fine. And so David Kaplan let down his guard, forgetting for a few moments that the area they would be passing through had been declared a war zone and it cost him his life.

One might say that today's world is something of a war zone. We have to prepare our children for dangers that our grandparents never dreamed of. On the job, we have to keep acquiring new skills as insurance against our job being eliminated. We people now-a-days try to keep their level of debt down. We are the first generation to have to worry about outliving our resources. We need to be ready. In a host of ways we need to prepare for the unimaginable. My purpose is not to frighten us, but to get us to do some serious planning, thoughtful preparation for the "living of these days" and the days ahead. As Sir Winston Churchill once said,

"Let our advance worrying become advance thinking and planning....."

Yes, let us think and let us plan - in our personal lives, in the life of society, life in this city and in this church.

ONE SOURCE OF SECURITY

But as we plan and as we prepare, let us always be mindful that there is only one true source of security in a world beset by turmoil. There is only one rock in a world of shifting sand. And that source of strength is beyond ourselves and this is something we should always remember.

Remember Julius Merget. Some of you may remember him, but I doubt it. He once told me a story that is worth sharing. Julius and Marian Merget were among the first senior citizens to move into the new housing at Stanley Isaacs, over at First Avenue and 93rd Street, when it was built back in the mid sixties. He was already into his seventies, a retired plumber, a native of Yorkville and father of five daughters. He and I were quite close.

I use to enjoy going over to their apartment at Stanley Isaacs which was on the top floor and we'd sit there and look out at the East River and watch the boats go up and down. One afternoon he was telling me that when the Hellgate Bridge was built across the East River, the engineers came upon an old derelict ship. It was lying in the river mud, deeply embedded in the mud and it was just where one of the central piers of the bridge was to go down through to its bedrock foundation.

One of the tugboats were able to move it from its ancient bed of mud. It would not move, no matter what force was applied. Finally, one of the workers came up with the solution. He took a large flatboat, which had been used to bring stone down the river and he chained it to the old sunken wreck when the tide was low. And then everyone waited for the tidal energies to do their work. Julius Merget told me that he stood there on the river bank watching the scene.

And slowly, the rising tide, with all the force of the ocean behind it and the moon above it, came up under the flatboat, raising it inch by inch. And as it came up, lifted by this irresistible power, the old derelict ship came up with it, until it was entirely out of the river mud that had been holding it down.

I loved that story and I remember so well the way my friend, Julius Merget would describe it. He told me the story more than once and each time it would move me.

You see, that is our hope as well. In this unpredictable world in which we live, we need a power greater than ourselves, strong enough to lift the world up out of the muck and the mud. We are beset by problems and by tremendous opportunities. The Church of Christ has an "open window" of opportunities as great as that which faced Martin Luther on the last day of October in the year 1517. 476 years ago today!

We shall need an inexhaustible source of oil for our lamps, to keep the light and love of Christ burning in this world as we wrestle with the great issues of our day. I believe the best preparation we can make for whatever may come our way is to strengthen the inner man or the inner woman. Our greatest need is that power and that peace that "passes all human understanding" and that ultimately comes from God who for us has come in Christ. Let this be the "take home" message for today.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and presence in these quiet moments that come at the end of this service of praise and prayer. Grant us the gift of foresight and then help each of us to build up reserves of faith and hope so that when periods of testing come into our lives, we may not be found wanting. Fill up our spiritual "tanks" with abundant resources of fortitude and patience that we may always shine with lights of love in dark times and in dark places. In the name and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.