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Purple Preppers

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a Prepper is “a person who believes a catastrophic disaster or emergency is likely to occur in the future and makes active preparations for it, typically by stockpiling food, ammunition, and other supplies.”

The concept of being a “prepper” is not new, but its form has changed depending on the era in which we were born. When I was in elementary school, the cold war was at its height and we practiced bomb drills, where we crouched under our wooden desks, as if that would help. People built bomb shelters . . . just in case, and doomsday scenarios were of nuclear war. Now, our children practice active shooter drills in their school rooms, even as we have our own church safety team who make plans to try to keep us safe every Sunday morning when we gather to worship.

On one level, all of us are preppers. Because, we plan so that we will be prepared for what we expect will happen. So, we talk about what to do in case of a shooter, or in case of fire or natural disaster. The floods of 2015 brought home to many of us the way in which a disaster can catch us unaware. On that Sunday in October, even as the water pressure was dropping in my own house, I couldn't conceive of the fact that the water might go out completely, and so I didn't run bathtubs full of water, but just watched uncomprehendingly as the water stream dwindled, trickled and then stopped. I just couldn't imagine a failure of our water system, so I was largely unprepared. I don't think I was alone.

So, all of us prepare for what we expect, and what we believe may happen. Today, we begin a season of preparation for a reality that only those who believe in God can even imagine. Today begins the season of Advent, the season when we begin to prepare for the coming of our God. The color of our season is purple, so I'd like to think about what it means to be purple preppers; those who believe that God is coming, as opposed to those preparing for an active shooter!

But the truth is that both the prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul ask us to believe in a future that is hard to imagine. Both readings ask us to believe, to hope and to prepare for a future in which God's rule will be the acknowledged reality. Isaiah pictures the home of God, Jerusalem, as a city on the highest mountain, into which all the nations want to come, in order that they may learn of God. The place where God rules is a place where no instruments of war are needed, and all tools are tools for growth and fruitfulness. No need for swords, so melt them

down and turn them into agricultural tools to grow food. No need for guns, tanks, knives and bombs, so melt them down and turn them into shovels, tractors, buckets and feeding troughs. In the future ruled by God, Isaiah says, we will not need to learn about how to wage war, how to gain an advantage over our opponent, because everyone will walk by the Lord's light.

The Apostle Paul says a similar thing in more personal terms. Paul pleads with us to love each other and so fulfill the law. Just prior to the verses we read Paul commands us, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Then besides all this – or while you are busy loving each other - know that God is very close to us. Paul says that we are like sleepers who do not know that the dawn is breaking and the sun is beginning to come up. But when we know and believe that God is near we will live in the light of God. Those who know and believe that God is near will no longer serve their own selfish ego-centric desires. The urgent plea Paul makes is for us to live in Christ – not apart from Christ - that is what he means by gratifying the desires of the flesh. It is not that our bodies are bad, or that we should somehow feel guilty for needing and wanting things. But what he pleads with us to do is to let our love for and life in Jesus Christ guide our bodies – not the other way around.

What we expect, and what we think will happen in the future will always guide our lives now. If we believe that only the strong survive, then we seek to either be, or be on the team with, the biggest strongest bully. If we believe that power, beauty and wealth are the only sure source of security, then we will hide our weakness, spend time and energy on how we look and associate with those who have the wealth to build a taller wall or the influence to get done what we want. If we think that the market is sliding into a recession or the stock market is about to collapse, we behave very differently than we do if we believe that the economy is going to continue to grow or our economic outlook is good.

And what we expect is based on our experience. So, in our lifetimes, we have never seen swords turned into plows, we have seen the opposite. We live in a world that grows corn to fuel our cars while people starve. In our lifetimes, we have not known God to feel very near, so we live according to our own desires and our own ego-centric desires.

And yet, Scripture asks us today to believe in something that we have only faintly felt, seen or known to be true. We know more about divorce than we know about faithfulness. We know more about broken relationships, conflict and anger, than we know about forgiveness and grace. We know more about loneliness than we know about community. We know more about sex as a means of power and obsession, than we know about love as doing good for someone regardless of how we feel about them.

And yet, even so Scripture says dare to hope and dare to believe. God is near. God is coming. Be prepared for the coming of the King. What you have only tasted in small bits will be the reality for all people in all places. God is on the side of peace, love, grace, community, conflict resolution, fruitfulness and abundance.

This is very hard to believe. So, often we settle for a watered down hope. We hope we get the Christmas present we want. We hope that we will be able to find a spouse, have a child, rebuild a broken relationship. We hope that our children will be safe, our investments secure, and our health intact. And when those hopes are crushed and we are disappointed by those we love the most or the things we value most, then our inability to believe in these promises of hope and peace and love seem way out of reach.

Our disillusionment and disappointment are real. Our hearts can throb with the pain of this life - our lost hopes and crushed dreams. But the very fact that our hearts can still throb, and can still feel pain means that we were created for something very different. The Christian faith teaches us that we were created for love, grace, community, peace and to live in the Lord's light.

On this first Sunday of Advent, I offer you a solidly Scriptural promise. You were made to live in the love and grace of God! We were not made for pain, loneliness, suffering, grief and drunkenness. We were created for something much more wonderful and much more life-giving than serving ourselves. We were created for life in loving, peace permeated, fruit producing relationship with God and all of God's children. And that is the reality that is dawning on us – just as surely as the sun comes up each day. Whether we can see that reality yet or not, it is coming. That deep sorrow, heart-breaking pain or numbing fear is not the final reality, it is only the darkness before the light. In fact, I would say that our sorrow, pain and fear are the very signs that another reality is possible for us. We may not yet see the sun coming up over the horizon. But, today we light a candle of Hope to remind us that even though we can only see it in bits and pieces today, the time is coming when all will walk “by the Lord's light.” So we must begin to prepare – now – for this reality. That's what I mean by being a purple prepper. We don't prepare for catastrophe. We prepare for the coming of our God. The pain we feel, moves our feet forward to seek relief. And God will come and will meet us, in the light of day and in the kingdom of peace. So – how do we prepare? How do we live in hope?

The first task is to dare to allow ourselves to imagine and to believe that peace can happen, that love can exist, that grace can cover all of our failures and weakness, that forgiveness can heal all of our Sin. In the name of the Christ who is coming, I'd like to ask you to spend some time imagining those realities. When God comes, what will our lives be like? How will we talk to our families when we dress ourselves in Christ? How will we spend our time, energy and money when we are convinced that power, wealth and beauty are fleeting and will not last, but that love, compassion and grace are eternal? How will we live when we no longer spend money and energy defending ourselves and what we believe is ours, but when the peace in our own hearts is lived out in a community of peace? What will we do differently when we know in our hearts that our worth as human beings never comes from grasping, scraping and demanding affirmation and our own rights, but instead that God even now speaks to us of our own value in God's eyes. How will we live when we know ourselves valuable and loved beyond reason and beyond deserving?

If we can allow ourselves to imagine such a reality, then we can have hope. And when we have hope or believe in that possibility, then we will act differently and we will begin to be prepared for the reality of God's Kingdom which is coming just as surely as the sun comes up every morning. So, says Scripture.

Scripture dares us to hope.

Scripture dares us to prepare for while we do not know what the future holds, we know who holds the future.

You see that candle right there As the Apostle Paul wrote, "the night is almost over, and the day is near." Hope in the future God will bring. Christian, wake up and be prepared. The news is good. It is very good.