

Always Be Ready

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. This morning's readings are from 1 Peter chapter 3 verses 13 through 22 and then John 14 verses 15 through 21.

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that when you are unmaligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.

He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is eight lives, were saved through water.

[1 : 3 1] And baptism, which this prefigured now saves you. Not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

And from John, If you love me, keep my commands, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you, and be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth.

The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans.

I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.

[2 : 5 2] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So friends, would you pray with me, please? Almighty and gracious God, we do give you thanks for this morning, give you thanks for this moment, and we give you thanks for your movement among us now.

Lord, with our hearts open, we pray that you come to each of us and pour into us what you know we need. Give us that seed that will grow and bear fruit for the honor and the glory of your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray.

Amen. So we're in week six of our Easter journey, and this week is called Always Be Ready. You can see it on the front of your bulletin.

Always be ready. So let me tell you a story. It's 1984, and I've graduated from high school, and I'm all excited to start my freshman year of college.

And we get this notice, which is normal, that you have to go for your orientation. So we had to sign up and pay a certain fee and had to make sure we could pay for the hotel and all of that.

[3 : 58] And so my mom's pretty excited about making sure this happens. Now, we were in a particular circumstance at that point, and funds were a little short. So things were kind of tight, but she was bound and determined to make sure that I got to this orientation.

And had to, you know, take some tests, all that sort of thing, make sure I was in the right classes. And so Friday after work, this is like mid-July, get in the car, and we head on up from Pittsburgh to State College, Pennsylvania.

It's about a three-hour trip. Now, the car had been acting up, and we were concerned about that, but we decided we got to do this.

So about a little over two hours into this trip, some of you will recognize what happens when all of a sudden you start to see this white stuff, this white puff of smoke start coming out from under your hood.

And sure enough, car just shut down, and we drift over to the side of the road. Now, for me, a 17-year-old who had not really been outside the city of Pittsburgh at that point, this is a scene straight out of a horror movie.

[5 : 19] Because on the one side, there is this huge open field, and it's dark now. There's this huge open field. There's this barn that's kind of falling down. It's about maybe 10 yards in front of us.

Big old mail pouch I had on the side. You can picture this scene. And about 50 yards behind us is this one house. And there's a couple lights on in it.

And behind this house is this huge pack of woods. That's all we can see. So my mom is, of course, kind of shook by this.

And so she says, well, I'm going to go back to that house, and I'm going to see if we can call somebody and come out here and help us. She says, you wait here.

So she heads on back to the house. And sure enough, someone comes to the door, and I can see them talking. And she starts to head back by herself. And so that didn't look great.

[6 : 22] But not too long after that, a guy from the house starts coming up behind her, which also, horror movie, remember that, doesn't look great. So she gets to the car, and the guy comes to the car.

He pops the hood. He looks up under it. He says, I'll be right back. So he's gone for about 5, 10 minutes. Felt like an hour, but it was only about 5 or 10 minutes.

And sure enough, he comes back, and he's got a couple things in his hand. I don't really know what they are. Now, it turns out this guy was a car guy.

And you could see that he had like three, four different cars in various states in the driveway. So, for those of you who know cars, what had happened is we had a leak in the radiator hose.

And he simply swapped one out. And took like three minutes. It's like bang, bang, he was done, and we were on our way. Now, the reason why I tell you that story is because we get back in the car, and my mother, who already had a couple tears coming down her face, started to really lose it at that point.

[7 : 40] And what she said was, you make sure you say a prayer tonight. Because that was God. The reason why I tell you that story is, one, because it's Mother's Day, and I want to honor her.

Secondly, it's because I want you to catch the importance of that. You see, I'm not a person who believes in luck. I'm not a person who believes in coincidences.

I'm not a person who really believes in accidents because of stories like that. When you think of all the places that that car could have broken down between Pittsburgh and State College, when you think of all the houses that we could have been in front of, when you think of the likelihood that even though this person knew how to fix the car, that he had the wherewithal and the ability to fix it in his driveway.

I don't believe in accidents. I believe in God. Now, the reason why I share this with you is because, remember where we are in our series.

You heard the reading today. I want you to pay attention to those verses in 1 Peter because they lay this out for us really well.

[9 : 04] So, if you got your Bibles, because I know some of you did. Y'all paid attention to Pastor Jen a couple weeks ago. Go to 1 Peter. We're in chapter 3.

Okay? I'm going to start at verse 13. Now, who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.

Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. But in your hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord. And here's our key, guys. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.

Yet do it with gentleness and respect. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that's in you.

And so, my question to all of you today is, what's your story? Because those of you whom I know, and most of you who even I know just a little bit, you're here for a reason.

[10 : 15] Now, most of you are past the age where mom drags you to church, so you're here for a reason. And that being the case, what's your story?

What's God done in your life that makes you so sure, that made you give your heart, that made you commit yourself to being a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Because there are people in your lives, I'm sure. People you encounter regularly, people you love.

Some may even be across from you at the dinner table. Who wonder why on a day like today, you would be sitting in a room instead of out here having fun.

So, what's your story? Are you able to help people understand the difference that Jesus makes in your life?

[11 : 19] Because that, friends, is the difference. We often forget how powerful our stories really are.

You know, I think there's something in human beings that we just seem to be instinctively drawn to stories. No matter what format they come to us in.

Whether it's that friend of yours from work who is telling you what they did over the weekend. Whether it's your favorite show on Netflix. Whether it's your favorite movie series like Star Wars or Star Trek or something like that.

Whether it's your favorite series of books or novels. There's just something about us that seems to be drawn to powerful story. And it speaks to us in ways that nothing else does.

It's how we connect with each other. As I said, that friend who tells you what happened over the weekend. Or just as we were catching up and greeting each other this morning. Folks telling about, you know, I was talking to Carl about his drive back.

[12 : 25] Stories. It's what we do. So again, what's your story? You see, friends, that's the thing that sometimes we miss.

We miss how powerful our stories really are. You know, if we can connect so easily over what happened in line at Tim Hortons. Or what happened in traffic on the way from this place to that place.

Or what happened during the game. And we can do that and we can pop that off like nothing. But what has Jesus done for you?

That story seems to trip some people up. That story seems to get stuck in people's throats for some reason. That story seems to be sort of at the bottom of our pile of go-tos.

Why is that? Well, let's talk about that for a minute. Because I think there's three pieces that keep us from being the powerful storytellers, especially in this context, that we could be.

[13 : 47] One, we have fallen into the trap of our culture, which tells us that, well, you know, religion should be private. That it's just sort of my thing.

And you need to keep it close. Right? And we do that because, well, we don't like to have other people messing with our story. But we then flip that around and say, well, because I don't want people to mess with my story, I'm not going to share my story because it would mess with theirs.

Problem with that thinking is that, well, that's not what Jesus told us to do. But Jesus said, go into the world and make disciples of all nations.

When you see Jesus reaching those who are the most outcasts, when you see Jesus talking to people who were the ones that society left behind, he doesn't just preach at them.

He tells them stories. That's what the parables are. Because he knows that that will reach them in ways that talking about big theology never will.

[14 : 58] And when people can see themselves in a story, like the story of a shepherd, or the good Samaritan, or the prodigal son, or which we've renamed in our Bible study the loving father.

Right, guys? We talked about that a lot. That being said, when you can see yourself in the story, it brings about a connection that makes you want to do something.

It speaks to you when you get it. It makes you long for, what did this person get? What does this person see that might make a difference for me too? And that works a whole lot better than long-winded preachers.

Don't forget, nobody knows your story better than you. You don't have to go to seminary to be able to talk about what Jesus has done for me.

And in many ways, it's infinitely more powerful than any theologian ever could be. So this idea that I need to keep it close, it's mine and it's private, that really doesn't work.

[16 : 13] Let's flip that around a little bit and say, well, I don't want to be pushy with it. You know, because we've all experienced some of those folks, yeah? Some of those street corner folks, some of those door-to-door folks, and some of those folks that just seem to always be willing to inject some things into any conversation.

And that can be uncomfortable. Y'all can be okay. Take a breath. It's okay. I can be uncomfortable. The problem about that is, is, well, nobody really asking you to be pushy.

See, the thing is, you're not commanded to be ignorant. You're commanded to be loving. Understand the difference. And when we talk about being commanded to be loving, if you see a friend who's grieving, if you see a friend or a loved one who's scared because of a medical diagnosis, if you see a co-worker who's confused and not sure how they're going to keep on going on in the midst of a huge choice they've got to make, you're not being pushy.

You're being loving. Because you're not going to preach at them. Say, hey, I want to offer a prayer for you, but, you know, when I was in a time like this, let me tell you what God did for me.

It's not pushy. But it is faithful. And it is loving. So don't confuse the two.

[18 : 02] To simply be that person. Think of it this way. If your friend was in front of you, hungry, and you had food to share, wouldn't you share it? If your friend was in front of you and they were bleeding and in need of help, wouldn't you do something?

You mean to tell me you'll see them with this broken heart, this confused mind, but you're going to hold back something you know would really help them at that moment? Because you don't want to be pushy.

Third thing that holds a lot of people back is quite frankly, we just get scared. Folks aren't comfortable sharing their story. Well, you heard me say that a lot of what makes us uncomfortable, we have the antidote for.

First, as I said, this isn't about some big lecture on theology. This is your story. Nobody knows your story better than you. How do you get your own story wrong?

You were there, right? You know what happened. Second, the other piece that makes people uncomfortable is like, well, I'm not sure that time is right.

[19 : 19] Listen to the gospel reading, right? Did you hear what Jesus said? He says, I will send you the comforter. I will send you the advocate.

One of the great gifts of the Spirit is to trust the Spirit when the Spirit says, now's the time. Tell your story. Listen for that push from God that says, this is the moment.

Because when God's in it and God is saying, you know, she really needs to hear this right now. If you believe that, then, yeah, you might be a little nervous about it, but remember whose side you're on.

Remember who's with you. So you don't have to be afraid because it's God that's giving the moment power, not you. And God knows what will work.

And if you lean into that, then trust that it's the right thing. You know, this thing about not being sure and being afraid to tell your story, one of the critical pieces that holds us back is we think, well, you know, I don't want to lose my friend.

[20 : 41] I don't want to make it weird. Well, here's the thing. If you felt that nudge of the spirit that says, you know what?

Tell them your story. When you're face to face with Jesus, Jesus isn't going to go, man, you really messed that up because you and your friend are just now in this really awkward place.

That doesn't sound like the Jesus I know. What Jesus would say is, you had a real opportunity there. It's too bad you didn't take it.

I sent you to make a difference and you didn't do it. Now, Jesus will love you through that, but that will be the issue.

Remember, Jesus will hold you accountable for what you were supposed to do, not what your friend was supposed to do. There's a great pastor named Calvin Butts and I was at a luncheon a few years ago and he was the keynote speaker and he said something that's always stayed with me about being a good disciple and he said, we often forget that we are called to be faithful, not successful.

[22 : 09] I want you to hear that again. We are called to be faithful, not successful. In other words, Jesus isn't going to be mad at you because your friend didn't all of a sudden give their life to Christ. Jesus is going to say, I asked you to do something and you didn't do it.

The power in those moments comes from the fact that the spirit is telling you now's the time. Trust your story and trust me.

That is the potential for power. That is the difference maker. Think about your own life. Think about the time someone who loved God showed up in your world.

When you were in a moment, when you were confused and you needed to go something, somewhere, what's going to really make a difference for me?

And that person gave you hope. That person gave you direction. That person poured strength into you.

[23 : 24] That, friends, is the work of the spirit. But it happened because of the power of the story. And now, that moment is almost certainly part of your story.

Let me tell you what God did for me. Because that's what this is about. you see, as Peter writes this letter, he's writing it to a group of Christians who are struggling.

And what's happened is they're kind of new at this faith thing. And they're doing some stuff that's making them stand out. And the people around them are kind of like, well, what are you doing that for? Last week, you were out here with us.

Or why are you doing that? what difference does that make? Always be ready to give an account of the hope that's in you. What's your story?

You think that's unfamiliar territory? How many times have the people you know, how many times have the people you love looked at you like you were kind of weird because you were holding on to Jesus in a moment that didn't make sense to them?

[24 : 39] when you were able to deal with some really hard and heavy news in a way that didn't break you, in a way that didn't crush your spirit, in a way that didn't send you into some flying rage, it's because you knew God could be trusted and you chose to lean into God.

But to the outside world, that makes no sense. And you see, those moments, those times that that door cracks open a little bit, always be ready to give an account for the hope that is in you.

Because the world won't understand. But see, friends, that's our challenge and that's our mission. For those who are out there hurting and they don't know what to do next, for those who are out there lost and they're like, help me make sense of my life.

Those who are seeing things happen to them and they get their hearts broken in all kinds of different relationships. Those who are saying, why do these things keep happening to me? Where do I find hope in a world that looks like this?

You, follower of Jesus, who have had Jesus do those things for you, be ready to tell your story. Because that is what changes people.

[26 : 11] That is what transforms lives and that is what helps those who do not know come to know. Because you are someone they might trust.

You can speak in a language that they can connect with. And if all of that church talk and all that stuff they might see on TV and all them bumper stickers will just ride right by them.

But if you can simply look them in the face, let me tell you what God did for me. That's really powerful.

Powerful in a way that nothing else can touch. And if we would see our world be different, if we would see those we care about who have wandered off the path make their way back, if we would see those who are in those lonely, isolated, hopeless, and desperate places not stay there, what will reach them?

It's probably not going to be some street corner preacher. it's probably not going to be some got Jesus bumper sticker on a car. It will be someone they encounter who looked them in the eye, who treated them with kindness, who met their practical need, and said, friend, let me tell you what God did for me.

[27 : 57] If we can commit to that, if we can always be ready to be that person, we can be indeed the body of Christ for a world that is hurting in so many different ways.

watch God move through you in the spirit if you simply say yes and let him use you in that way. Amen and amen.

Loving and gracious God, we are ready. We know who you are and what you can do. We have encountered your amazing love that redeemed us. We have encountered your amazing power that took us from situations.

We encountered your amazing strength and grace that moved us through these deep dark valleys in our life. Lord God, we know that you have put us into these moments from time to time and it was only you who made it possible.

It was only you who brought us through. So God, we have stories. We know that it was you who made the difference for us. So yes, Lord, we are ready and we are willing.

[29 : 09] Spirit, move in each of us. Open our eyes to your work, to those moments when they present themselves, that we might be a living witness to our living hope.

Let us indeed tell our story so that those who don't know will come to know, that those who are lost might be found, and that your world would be transformed.

Amen. indeed, there are always so many reasons to praise God, and we know that that's what that means, right? For those of you who may not have studied your biblical Hebrew, that means praise the Lord.

Hallelujah. The word means praise the Lord, and that's what it means to raise a hallelujah. And so as you come into that place, undoubtedly, as you live your life, there are multiple reasons to raise a hallelujah.

You can put your faith into practice this week in a variety of ways. We have multiple Bible study opportunities, multiple fellowship opportunities. This is the week for the men's breakfast, as well as I saw there's one book club piece in the bulletin.

[30 : 16] All of this is available, so for those of you who are online, you can find that on the website as well. Please take advantage of all these opportunities. I want to highlight one thing in particular. You will see that in your bulletin we talk about a series of upcoming information sessions about what's happening in the United Methodist Church.

These are purely informational, and so some of you may be connected to friends who are attending other churches or have relatives in different parts of the country and have heard different things about what's happening in the UMC.

And so if you want to find out more about that, get the true background history of it all, then come to one of these sessions. Also, if you can't make any of those three times, please get in touch with me, because if more people want to find out but can't make the scheduled sessions, we'll schedule some more.

Okay? So all of that's available to you. You can read about it, find out more about it in your bulletin. That said, let's receive our benediction. In the name of God, our creator and king, and in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our savior, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, our advocate and our sustainer, may God bless us now as we leave to love and serve God and all God's children.

Amen.