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“Be Ready”

Isaiah 1:1;10-20 Luke 12:32-40 Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 1:1;10-20

The book of Isaiah begins with a vision of the wickedness that Judah had fallen into. This book doesn't take time for ice breaking niceties. Isaiah calls the people to not be fooled by their ability to bring offerings and offer worship to God. God wants more than sacrifices. God wants them to repent and seek justice and rescue the oppressed, to defend the orphan and plead for the widow. That is what the Lord wants most. Hear the word of the Lord from Isaiah 1:1 and 20-30.

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 12:32-40

We heard from the 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews that listed the names of those who were inducted into Heaven's Hall of Faith. In Luke 12 Jesus tells his disciples to focus on treasures in heaven and to be ready to go at all times. Hear the word of the lord from the Gospel of Luke 12:32-40

Yesterday I volunteered at Sterling High School for the Shots for Tots event sponsored by the Baytown Rotary. Over 175 families came to receive free immunizations for the new school year. My assignment was to help oversee the free snacks, but I wound up helping occupy the children as they colored and played with stickers while their parents filled out the necessary forms.

Guess what stickers they liked? Finding Dory, Super heroes like the Hulk and Captain America and Hawk, and Iron Man and Black Widow and... Teen Age Mutant Ninja Turtles.—heroes on the half shell.

When I had a break in the action I took a look at my Facebook feed and saw an article that amazed me. It was about Michael Phelps.

Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time, carried the United States flag in the opening ceremony for the Olympics in Rio De Janeiro on Friday night. The 22-time medal winner (18 of them gold) , who is set to compete at the Summer games in Rio, said in an interview with NBC's Today Show that his DUI arrest in 2014 led to a "downward spiral" that left him feeling the lowest he had ever been.

“I was a train wreck,” he told ESPN. “I was like a time bomb, waiting to go off. I had no self-esteem, no self-worth. There were times where I didn't want to be here. It was not good. I felt lost.”

Underneath the surface were unresolved issues from his past. One of the biggest issues resulted from his parents' divorce when Phelps was nine-years-old, and a “complicated” relationship with his father, Fred Phelps, a Maryland state trooper.

"I felt like he was abandoning me and I didn't put any energy into something I thought was a dead-end street." I thought, *this is the end of my life... How many times will I mess up? Maybe the world would be better without me.*"

An unexpected rescue call came from a longtime friend, NFL star Ray Lewis. At the insistence of Lewis and his family members Michael checked into The Meadows, a psychological trauma and addiction treatment center in Arizona.

Phelps entered rehab carrying a book Lewis gave him, *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren. "It's turned me into believing there is a power greater than myself and there is a purpose for me on this planet."

Warren's book also convinced Phelps to reconcile with his father, because God's heart is always for reconciliation. When the two men first saw each other they opened their arms and embraced in a big hug. "It was good, challenging at times, but probably the biggest learning experience we've had with one other. I didn't want to have that "what if." I didn't want to go through life without having the chance to share emotions I wanted to share with him. That's what I missed as a kid."

In November 2014, Phelps left the Meadows rehab facility and resumed training for the Rio Olympics. Three months later he asked his longtime girlfriend, Nicole Johnson, to be his wife. On May 5th, 2016, their son, Boomer Robert, was born.

Michael had 18 gold medals-treasures of earth. The rest of his life he will be working for what Jesus prescribed in our gospel lesson this morning--an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

To many, Michael Phelps was and is a hero. He belongs in the Olympic Hall of Fame. Now that he has found his purpose in life chances are he will wind up, along with those who can't even tread water, in God's Hall of Faith.

There are many ingredients that go to make up a hero. First, I believe heroes are people of great courage.

Two small boys walked into the dentist's office. One of them said bravely. "I want a tooth taken out and I don't want any gas, and I don't want it deadened because we're in a hurry!"

The dentist said, "You're quite a brave young man. Which tooth is it?"

The boy turned to his smaller friend and said, "Show him your tooth, Tommy."

This week on my Facebook page I came across a clip of Andy Stanley, who is the pastor of North Point church with several campuses in the Atlanta area. Andy addressed his remarks to "All those over 45 years old". He said,

"Many of you have grown weary and have lost heart. And the reason is you have fixed your eyes on a political system. You have fixed your eyes on a political leader. You have fixed your eyes on the economy. You have fixed your eyes on the on the good old days, and you are growing weary and you need to knock it off, and I'll tell you why! You are scaring the children! The generation that is coming along behind us is going to take their cue from us and here's the cue we're giving them, "Oh my if we don't get the right person in the Oval Office, if we don't fix the economy it's the end of the world, if we don't have religious freedom like my mom and my grandma had it's the end of the world. If we don't get the right policies it's the end of the world. It's all coming unraveled. Nothing could be further from the truth. Government matters, policies matter, but neither of those matter as much as men and women who understand this word -- Faith. We have nothing to fear. So, all of you people over 45 knock it off. You need to model for the next generation that God can be trusted. Get involved in the political system. Get involved in the culture, get involved in your society, but you never fix your eyes there, fix your eyes on Jesus." 1)

As Hebrews 1:1 said Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of this not seen. As Jesus said in our gospel lesson, "Do not be afraid, little flock."

There are still persons of courage in our world. But courage is only apparent in the face of hardship. Most of us prefer comfort to courage, Maybe that's why heroes are scarcer and scarcer. In the dearth of heroes we seem to have settled for celebrities.

Dr. Mark Trotter notes that "God gives heroes of the Bible very little comfort." To the complaining Job, God says, "Stand up on your feet like a man. I have something to show you." To Elijah who is hiding from Jezebel in a cave, God says, "Get out of here. I have something better for you to do with you life." To Moses, hiding among his father-in-law's flocks in Midian, not wanting to go back to the dangers of Egypt, complaining that he can't be a leader, God says, "I don't care if you don't think you're a leader. I'll tell you what to do." And then to Paul, plagued by some thorn in his flesh for which he was given no answer, just the words, "Keep on going, and I'll give you strength. My grace is sufficient for you."

"These are heroes of faith the Bible holds up as our examples . They are the examples of what faith looks like." (2) They are also examples of what courage looks like.

Courage is the resource God gives us when we are fighting giants. If we never go out to fight giants we have no need for courage. Of course, life sometimes sends us giants--a fatal disease, the loss of a loved one, the end of a dream or a career. Sometimes we face giants in the moral arena--ethics on the job, faithfulness in the face of great temptation.

Some of the most courageous people I know will never make anyone's Hall of Fame. They are quiet people, modest people who prefer to stand in the wings more than bask in the limelight. But they stand for what is right, they refuse to let go of their faith in times of great stress, they hang in there when the going gets tough. They are people of great courage.

Second, I believe heroes have a great confidence, not in themselves but in God. The amazing thing about the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 is not how strong they were but how human, how ordinary, how very much like us. Their courage and their character were not their own. That long list in Hebrews contains a telling phrase: "They were weak, but became strong." It seems that strength and super powers are not prerequisites to hero-ness. God's heroes are weak people who have simply made themselves available.

The third thing that heroes have is a calling. The list of heroes in Hebrews 11 contained people who had courage, who had confidence in God but they also had a calling from God. Last week our youth challenged us all to GO into all the world and make disciples from every nation, marking them with the seal of baptism and teaching them to obey what God has commanded. When our call comes, will we be ready?

Jesus knows just as well as any of us that plenty is wrong with the world. He is not suggesting that Christians will be immune to suffering. Rather, he is asking his followers to adopt a way of life that is not rooted in the securities of this world. He is asking us to follow the example of the heroes of Heaven's Hall of Faith. He is asking us to be ready.

Lutheran pastor Larry Henning tells a humorous story about when he was in the fourth grade. He writes: Our teacher, Mrs. Cannon, would periodically leave the room and say, I'll be back in a few minutes. Just work quietly at your desks on your math worksheets. Now, my friends and I tried hard to figure out just when Mrs. Cannon was coming back. We would take turns going to the door to see if she was indeed making her return. Why this obsession about the exact timing of her return? It was because in her absence, we were throwing chalkboard erasers around the room and didn't want to get caught.

Mrs. Cannon was a good teacher who was nice most of the time, but her wrath in response to willful disobedience was an awesome thing to behold. Meanwhile, our classmate Elaine never worried about just when Mrs. Cannon might reappear. Why? Because Elaine would be at her desk the whole time faithfully doing what Mrs. Cannon asked her to do. Whenever Mrs. Cannon would return, she would find Elaine faithfully at work.

Elaine was ready. She was doing the work her teacher has set before her. She has no need to fear the return of her teacher, unlike the boys in the story because she was busily engaged in her work.

In our lives, Jesus has given us work to do as well. We are to live as those who belong to God. We are to love as those who belong to God. If we are faithfully engaged in such work for the sake of God's kingdom, then we need not fear those times when Jesus enters our lives, when Jesus returns in the stranger, or alien, or outcast. We will be ready, for our hearts are turned toward God, and we have been faithfully doing the work of love that we are given. 3)

The best way to be ready is to get ready through service. Thursday night I went to a meeting of Former Lee, an organization that supports Lee College. At the meeting they announced that they have changed their name to Lee College Alliance. Dr. Brown, the president of Lee College spoke about how Lee College serves the community. One example was how the Men's Basketball team went this last Wednesday and helped serve the meal at Kurt's Kitchen sponsored by Cedar Bayou Grace Methodist every Wednesday night at the Fellowship Hall of the old Grace Methodist church. This morning's Baytown Sun quoted Malik Anderson, a sophomore out of Los Angeles who said. "I love serving any and every thing I can to help give back to the community. I have been blessed to have a privileged life and I'm aware others are not as fortunate. It's a privilege to be able to give back."

This week I got a call from another pastor here in town. He was driving by and saw our marquee that said, "Home of Meals on Wheels." He called me because he and his church have committed to helping the homeless that gather by the Gazebo by the Diana Gray Child Care Center. For the next 4 Saturdays they are feeding breakfast to those who come there and doing what they can to help them find shelter. He wanted to know if we could get together with other churches and offer help to those in need.

Like God said through Isaiah so long ago, God wants us to repent and seek justice and rescue the oppressed, to defend the orphan and plead for the widow. For all the words that we use to describe Christian behavior there is none better than servant.

In Jesus' parable, the master had left to go to a wedding banquet and there was no way for the servants of that master to know when he would return. Because weddings in Jewish culture were week long events, one never knew how long the stay. The servants did not have access to their master's plans. They were simply to be ready when he knocked on the door.

On the surface, this is a routine story. Everyone listening would have understood the word picture that Jesus told. But there is a remarkable twist at the end. It involves a role reversal. Jesus says, it will be good for those servants who are watching and meet their master at the door. To them that made sense. They would understand that the master would have certain needs that must be met when he arrived.

But that is not how Jesus ends the story. It is not the servants who wait on the master. It is the master who waits on the servants! It will be good for those servants who are ready for the master not because there is the threat of punishment for un-alert behavior. It will be good for them because there is the promise of a lavish master who upon his return graciously gives to his servants. That will be an unfailing treasure in heaven, where not thief comes near and no moth destroys and that will outshine the 18 Olympic Gold Medals that Michael Phelps had going into this Olympics and even others he might win.

That is a Purpose Driven Life that finds its fulfillment in eternity. That's the kind of promise that our Lord has given, that upon his return He will sit us down at his banquet table, and satisfy the needs of all his servants whether they can swim fast or not. That will be the greatest honor, when those who have served are inducted into Heaven's Hall of Faith because when their call came, they had courage and confidence that made them be sure to ... be ready.

Let us pray

God of wisdom, and grace, we are overcome by the benefits you have given us. We need not fear since in Christ you have promised us eternal life. You craft our talents and implant them within us; we live by your grace.

Keep the lamp of your goodness burning brightly within us, as a sign of our welcome when Christ comes to us and asks us to serve. Should doubt and depression make our worship halfhearted, startle us with your grace so that we regain the sense of wonder. When our confession become casual and we have little intention of changing our ways, call us to account.

As Abraham stepped out in faith, not knowing where he was to go, may we likewise venture forth by the light of your promises. Deliver us from the excessive need to control our own destinies, and restore our trust in your infinite goodness. Help us to bear within us the hope that in Christ all things are possible.

Amen

- 1) Andy Stanley "If you are over 45 and worried."
- 2) Mark Trotter, GRACE ALL THE WAY HOME.
- 3) Larry Henning, adapted by Mark Richardson, Ready to Risk