

Emergency preparedness. Back in 1961, President John F. Kennedy spoke about the possibility of nuclear war, calling for the stocking of "fallout shelters in case of attack." These bunkers -- equipped with food, water, first-aid kits and other minimum essentials for survival -- were designed to protect families from an apocalyptic war.

But the year 1961 was not the first time that people spoke about the possibility of the world coming to an end. In fact, the book of Revelation is sometimes called the book of the "Apocalypse" because it speaks of the uncovering of God's plan for the climax of human history. And whenever we hear someone mention the Apocalypse, which sounds awfully scary and chaotic, we should keep in mind that it is a Greek word which simply means "uncovering" or "revelation."

Along these same lines, as we explore our Second Lesson for today, we witness the Apostle Paul doing his own bit of uncovering in one of his earliest letters to the Christians of the Mediterranean region. At one point during his ministry, because of the persecution he was experiencing from his fellow Jews, Paul had to flee the Greek city of Thessalonica. He wrote his letters to the Thessalonian Christians there, to prepare them for the return of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle declares, "you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." And the "day of the Lord," he was talking about was the moment that Christ would return to act as judge over the world, bringing God's work to completion. "When they say, 'There is peace and security,'" warns Paul, "then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!" Sudden destruction! Labor pains! No escape! Those are some apocalyptic images that are almost as frightening as nuclear war.

Fortunately, Paul gives his followers guidance on how to prepare for the end. His correspondence with the Thessalonians is kind of a guidebook on

emergency preparedness, and it is definitely one that we need to read and study these days. It is more pertinent than ever, because many Americans are already doing their own kind of prepping. Yes, that's right. Many people today are prepping for the apocalypse. And some of them aren't focusing on the minimum essentials for survival. They're not the kind of rugged survivalists who define "running water" as a nearby stream.

Luxury bunkers also seem to be a trend these days. Apparently, high-end shelters are very hot right now. Sales of units costing more than \$500,000 have increased 700 percent in one year! One model includes "a gym, a workshop, a rec room, a greenhouse and a car depot." Clients include Hollywood actors, sports stars, bankers and businesspeople. Bill Gates is rumored to have bunkers under his houses in Washington and California.

All of which leads to the question: How should *we* be prepping during these perilous days? In the face of the "day of the Lord," the apostle Paul does not recommend building a bunker with a gym, a workshop, a rec room, and a green house. Instead, he wants us to be "preppers" who "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." In difficult and tragic times, Paul certainly wants us to be safe, but he doesn't suggest that we seek the protection of a walled compound patrolled by armed security personnel.

Instead, he recommends a suit made of faith, hope and love. These qualities are gifts of God that will endure until the very end of time, until we see God face to face. In another of his letters, written to a church in Corinth, Paul says that "faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." When God gives us a suit of armor, he wants it to be made of the most durable materials available. That is why he chooses faith, hope and love.

A Presbyterian pastor named Jeff Krehbiel wore this type of equipment as he served churches in New York City, Wilmington, and Washington, D.C. For 30

years, he did urban ministry and community organizing, always showing deep faith in God and in the people around him. With a passion for biblical story-telling, Jeff led worship services that were full of creative and interactive experiences.

Whenever life got tough, instead of retreating into a bunker, Jeff lived with hope. He worked hard to change the world around him, moving it slowly and surely toward the kingdom of God. And through it all, he always had a lot of love - love for his church members, his colleagues, and the residents of the city around him. Jeff wore the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet he had the hope of salvation. This equipment helped him through many perilous situations.

But then one day, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In a message to his friends, he wrote that his cancer made him sad but not depressed, and he thanked everyone for their support. He said, "I am floating on the buoyancy of God's love." Within two months he had passed away, but when he reached the end of his life he was completely wrapped in faith, hope and love.

The Apostle Paul knew something that all of us discover at some point in our lives, that is we are all going to die one day, and that no amount of preparation can save us. For this reason, he challenges us to step out into the world with confidence, determined to live by our Christian values. Paul says that we are "children of light and children of the day," people who leave the darkness of underground bunkers and go into the brightness of the world to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

In his book *Strength to Love*, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." When we live by our values, we shine light into dark places, and put love in the place of hate. In apocalyptic times, we are not supposed to hide in a bunker. That's a defensive posture, one that is usually adopted by people motivated by old anxieties such as nuclear war and civil unrest. Instead, we

are to take the offense, bravely going out into the world to actively demonstrate the faith, hope and love we have received from God.

Practically every year, around the Holidays, we hear stories about local police departments putting faith into action. According to a newspaper article found in *The Virginian-Pilot* a single mother was driving with her children when suddenly she saw blue lights flashing in her rear-view mirror. She pulled over, fearing that she would get a ticket. The police officer walked up and asked, "How many kids are in the car?" She answered, "Three."

Returning to his patrol car, the officer gathered an armful of gifts, which he proceeded to put in her trunk. "This can't be happening to me," she thought to herself. "Merry Christmas," said the officer. "Why did you stop me?" she asked, after thanking him. He responded, "Each year the police department tries to find ways to give back to our community. We just step out in faith and give where we think there may be a need." Instead of taking a defensive posture, these police are going on the offense -- showing their faith and hope and love.

Our challenge than is to always build up instead of building down. Yes, it is tempting to dig a hole in the ground and construct a luxury bunker -- especially when we fear climate change, disease, terrorism, or extremism. But Paul challenges us to "encourage one another and build each other up." And that is a big deal, because he could have dug himself a hole when he was facing persecution in Thessalonica, but he didn't. The Apostle chose to build up his friends, instead of building them down, or tearing them down. In fact, like Jesus in today's Gospel Parable from Matthew, Paul would probably remind us to avoid being like the one servant in the story who buried his talent in the ground, rather than taking the risk to use it to help himself and others grow.

In numerous letters to his fellow Christians, Paul says that we are to build up others, and sometimes this means "speaking the truth in love," instead of avoiding

difficult topics. It also means encouraging one another and finding ways to “please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.” And it wouldn’t hurt for us to remember that instead of only focusing on our own talents and abilities, we should also seek to understand, recognize, and acknowledge that God is also working through our brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the entire Christian community. "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit," says Paul, "and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord."

When Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew the end of days was coming, he replied, “I would plant a tree.” What he meant by that, was that we should always approach each day with hope, even if it might be our last. Jesus does not want us to prep for the apocalypse by hiding in a bunker. Instead, he wants us to put our various gifts to use in ways that are far more constructive and lasting. So let's seek to live in the light of Christ and let us encourage one another to serve our world with faith, hope and love. After all, there is no better way to prepare for the "day of the Lord" -- today and in the days that follow. Amen.