

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one we are waiting and preparing for, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I don't know if you're tired of hearing about my exploits in the military, but considering the call to readiness in our Gospel text for today, I can't help myself from talking about my readiness background in the Air Force. You might think as a Personnel, or Human Resource Officer, I would have had a strictly office desk job and nothing to do with the readiness of our troops to answer our nation's call to deploy to any contingency operation, anywhere, anytime. You might think that, but you'd be wrong. The Personnel career field is directly tied to the readiness of every airman. As Personnel specialists we were responsible for keeping the database of those airmen who are on alert for deployment, those with various temporary deferments for illness or other reasons, and those who were permanently deferred from deployment. We have an entire office that maintains the mobility data on every airman assigned to the base. That's their everyday job. Personnel is also responsible for deploying when the need requires. We are the first to go and the last to return. Our job while deployed is to account for who is there and to keep in contact with all the on-scene unit commanders to ensure they have the correct mix of specialties needed to conduct their part of the mission. We stay in contact with our counterparts back at the headquarters keeping them apprised of any needed personnel specialties. In the event of casualty situations, we obtain the

member's vital information and quickly report what happened back to the member's home unit so the next of kin can be notified, hopefully before they hear about it on the news. There's one more very important role Personnel specialists play in the readiness of the troops. We're responsible for setting up a processing unit that all members who are about to deploy must go through before they depart. On this processing line we go over their Squadron command records, their personnel records, and their medical records to ensure they are eligible and have all the necessary personal equipment they are required for the deployment. We offer legal assistance for the member to make out wills and powers of attorney, we have medical staff present to ensure the member is up to date on their immunizations and other medical needs. We have a finance representative to allow the member to take out a cash advance if necessary. During this processing every member is accounted for and their paper orders are printed. A package including the printed orders for each departing member is given to the highest-ranking person on each departing flight. This ensures the Personnel team at the deployed location has accountability for every person at their deployed location.

Each person who has been officially notified of being placed in a designated mobility position must keep their bags packed and be ready to deploy within 30 minutes. To ensure the readiness of the Wing, every Wing Commander requires us to set up and practice this Mobility Processing Unit so that in the event the Wing is

called up for a real-life deployment they can be reasonably certain the entire Wing is ready to go. We used to do these practices at least once a month. During the processing, a random number of airmen would be selected to have their mobility bags inspected. Despite the serious nature of being constantly ready for any contingency, the inspectors would inevitably find some deploying airmen whose mobility bags were stuffed with newspaper or toilet paper instead of the three BDU uniforms, 30 day supply of toiletries, safety gear and numerous other items required by Air Force Regulations. IT would be a very bad thing if you actually deployed to a hostile area and your bags were packed with newspaper instead of your personal and protective gear...

That's a long story that brings me to the point of this sermon today. How ready are you for the end? For military members being ready is spelled out in very specific terms, but for Christians being ready for Christ's return may be a little more ambiguous. What are we to do in order to make sure we're ready for Jesus' return? When I think about Jesus returning, I think about 3 different returns. First, I think about Jesus returning anew in my heart every Christmas when we prepare for his return during the season of Advent. Every year we place great emphasis on repentance of our sins and opening our hearts for Jesus during the Advent season before Christmas. Unfortunately, for far too many people this message is drowned out by the crass commercialization of the Christmas holiday.

The second way I think about Christ's return is at the time of death. I've heard so many stories from families and even experienced in my own family, the very real presence of Jesus when that beloved family member passes from this life to the next. How do we prepare for the coming of Jesus at the time of our own death? For one thing, we're commanded to partake of the Sacraments by Jesus himself. Both Baptism and Holy Communion are called the means of Grace. Through these we receive forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life and in them God makes us ready for that great day when we get to meet Jesus face to face.

Today we ensured Trevor Groff was made a part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. In his Baptism, Trevor's bag was packed with everything he needs for his journey in both this world and the next. In addition to forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life, Trevor also received the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He was given the gift of faith and trust in Jesus' promises. That gift frees him of his sins and from the bonds of death. How Trevor remains ready for Jesus' return is now up to his parents and sponsors along with all of us as his brothers and sisters in Christ. That same opportunity and responsibility holds true for every Baptized Christian. We keep each other ready by holding each other accountable for keeping the promises made during the Baptismal Rite. Those promises, in case you missed them earlier, are these: to come to the services of God's house, to

teach the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, and the Ten Commandments, to provide the Holy Scriptures, that's why we give Bibles at age appropriate intervals, and to instruct one another in the Christian faith. There are not suggestions. They are sacred promises, a covenant, made between the people of God and our Father in Heaven. When we keep these sacred promises, we are ready for Christ to come for us at any time.

The third thing I think about when I think about Christ's return is his return at the end of time or what religious scholars call the eschaton. The Bible says Jesus will return on the clouds with the hosts of Heaven. The dead will rise, and all people will see His coming. I know lots of people who are afraid of this event. They misinterpret the visions of John from the Book of Revelation and fear the mass destruction they read about in that book. The other big misinterpretation about the eschaton is that some Christians will be taken up into heaven while other people will be "Left Behind". This is commonly referred to as the Rapture. The Rapture is totally non-Biblical and the theory is only about 100 years old. In the Bible the eschaton is described as Christ coming from heaven to earth, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to earth, and God dwelling with mortals right here on good old terra-firma, the earth. There's no indication anywhere in the Bible where the good Christians will be taken away from the pain and suffering of this world. That's not what the Kingdom of God offers. Rather, we are promised

our place in this new Jerusalem where God himself will wipe away all our tears.

Readiness for the eschaton means we go about living our lives doing the things Jesus taught us like loving our neighbors as ourselves, like taking care of all creation, and like being good stewards of the blessings God provides every day. If we're going about doing these things we'll be ready anytime God decides the time is right for Jesus to return to judge the living and the dead.

So, are your bags packed and ready for the return of our Lord or have you been stuffing them with useless stuff like the airmen who stuffed their mobility bags with newspapers? I suggest we all take some time to examine what's in our faith Mobility Bags. When that day does come when we're called home to be with Jesus or Jesus finally returned to reign in glory, may we be found ready for all the ways Jesus returns to us. May we remember our Baptism and partake of Holy Communion often and regularly. May we be shining examples of God's love for our neighbors and our enemies. As we continue to help usher in God's Kingdom through our acts of goodness and kindness, may we finally be assured that when Jesus returns, his love and his mercy will reign over us and all people. Amen.