

1 Peter 3:15

November 27, 28, 2013 – Thanksgiving Eve / Day

Always Be Prepared✦ **to live your hope**✦ **to give the reason**

In the name of Christ our Lord, dear chosen ones of God, strangers in the world:

Hearing the words, **Always Be Prepared**, will always remind me of two things that happened on my first trip to China in 2005. The first was on a weekday morning when I had just changed back into my street clothes wondering what I'd do next. There was knock on my apartment door and a young Chinese woman was signaling in broken English to hurry and follow her. "Mary's class. You teach!" she said. "But I was told I would not teach this morning," I replied. "China – change!" she said as we hurried out.

Half a mile down the crowded street to the Seminary, I did not know what I would teach. Walking up to the front of the classroom, the Seminary President's wife said, "We are starting 1 Corinthians. You teach Greek." Thanks to God's gifts of computers and projects, along with WELS training and my work on *The Preacher's Apprentice*, I was able to teach. I stressed to the students: **Always Be Prepared**.

A few days later Friday evening looked quiet as we talked at dinner. Then Mary looked right at me and said, "We have presentation for seekers tonight. You teach." 70-80 Chinese would come in off the street with varying English skills, so I would have to teach through an interpreter. When I looked surprised at the assignment, Mary answered, "You told the students **Always Be Prepared**." That time I gave thanks for my daughter Katie's advice: "Dad, wherever I go, people love to hear about my family." On the thirteen-hour flight I put together a PowerPoint presentation on "My Family, My Work, My Best Friend." This turned out to be a great opportunity to share my **hope**. By God's grace I was prepared.

Lutheran pastors like Martin Rinkart, however, had little opportunity to prepare. Their challenges make mine look like child's play. You see, Martin Rinkart lived in the city of Eilenburg, while the Thirty Years' War devastated Germany. It was only a few decades after Luther's death. Roman Catholic Imperial forces were determined to put down the Lutheran rebellion, as they saw it. Rome was winning. So the German Lutherans asked for help from the powerful Swedish Lutheran King Gustavus Adolphus. This is the King after which the college in St. Peter, MN, is named. His innovations on the battlefield with light artillery, standardized weaponry and cross training earned him many victories, along with the admiration and imitation by later Generals such as Napoleon and George S. Patton. Gustavus Adolphus turned the tide of the Thirty Years War and saved Lutheran cities from destruction by force of arms.

Armies must eat. Three times Rinkart's city of Eilenburg was overrun by invaders, once by the Austrians, twice by the Swedes. One general demanded tribute far beyond what impoverished citizens could afford. So Pastor Rinkart begged for mercy for his fellow citizens, but mercy was refused. He turned to the townsfolk saying, "Come, my children, we can find no mercy with men; let us take refuge with God." He fell on his knees and prayed so fervently that the general was ashamed and relented.

But mostly Martin Rinkart and his family suffered. To feed and clothe his wife and children he was forced to mortgage his future income for several years. During one long siege pestilence and famine swept through the town. 8,000 people died in Eilenburg in two years. By some reports Pastor Rinkart buried nearly 4,500 people in a single year, sometimes 70 a day. Among them were coworkers and his wife. How could he remain faithful, hopeful and sympathetic while using his gifts as a skilled musician and poet? How could Martin Rinkart write 66 hymns?¹ We are singing the favorite again today: "Now Thank We All Our God." Spiritually, Rinkart knew how to **Always Be Prepared – to live your hope**.

¹ Aufdemberge, C.T. *Christian Worship Handbook*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Pub. House, 1997, pp. 614, 822f.

This is how the dear Holy Spirit inspired Peter to write our verse: ***“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”*** Paul said the same in our Second Lesson: ***“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”*** (Philippians 4:12f NIV84) Both Peter and Paul earnestly honored Christ as Lord of their life and Savior of their souls. They were convinced that God sent His Son down to suffer for us here on this earth and in His own body to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. When you are constantly looking at Christ for forgiveness and peace, troubles tend to melt away like ice in the summer. When you **live your hope** by sharing God’s blessings with others, they cannot help asking, “Why?” Then you can **Always Be Prepared...**

✠ to give the reason

That’s what WELS Christian Aid and Relief is all about. Their motto on today’s bulletin cover reads: “The Work of Our Hands Can Open Opportunities for Our Lips.” Through them we clear debris for strangers in tornado strewn neighborhoods of America. Through WELS Christian Aid and Relief we dig wells to provide clean water in Africa. We care for orphans in Haiti. People ask, “Why would you come and do this for strangers you don’t even know?” Our caring brothers and sisters are ready with **the reason**: “Because I believe that God’s own Son Jesus came down to give His life for me, a stranger. He did the same for you. Now it’s my turn to show my thanks to God by helping you.” Hands can work wonders, but God uses lips filled with His Word to save souls and bodies for everlasting bliss in heaven. He gives us opportunities to express His love from our hands and hearts. He says, ***“Open your mouth and I will fill it.”*** Only God can create faith in human hearts. He wants to use our lips for life.

Some of you realize that giving **the reason** for our hope is how Friends of China was born right here in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Sainted Pastor Loren Steele found out from new Chinese friends that PhD candidates were landing with no place to stay and no one to help them. He organized WELS members to meet these strangers at the airport, give them a place to stay, food and clothing, and get them settled. A few weeks later Loren gathered them together to have Chinese Christians share the joys of knowing Jesus as our Savior. Soon more Chinese wanted to worship our gracious God. And they wanted folks back home to know Jesus too. Now we are sending scores of young English teachers, and China Partners is encouraging Chinese students and pastors to **give the reason** for our hope.

One of my favorite explanations of hope comes from a pastoral newsletter, *Preach the Word*:

*Here’s how hope brings joy to your soul. You don’t live in the past with bitterness and regrets; you are looking forward because you have an incredible future. No matter how rough life may be right now, someday soon you’re going to be pain-free and celebrating in everlasting glory. Hope is how you face surgery or tough it out in a difficult work situation. Hope is where your heart is when your body is limping along.*²

Whatever grief has come your way, trust God to end it when valuable lessons are learned. He does not willingly bring affliction and grief on His dear children. God allows only what will serve our good, promises to make everything work for our eternal good and gives us His power made perfect in our weakness. Peter and Paul wrote from trying times as apostles. Pastor Martin Rinkart wrote, “Now Thank We All Our God,” from horrendous troubles that could not invade his heart with worries and cares because He trusted in God. What is the writing on your heart? What hope can people read in your life? **Always Be Prepared – to live your hope and to give the reason.** In Christ you conquer all. Have a Thanksgiving stuffed with thanks and praise to God, and laced with love for your neighbor. Amen.

² Quoted from a WELS sermon by Pastor Daron Lindemann, Editor of *PREACH THE WORD* – January / February 2007, p. 2.

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