

Good morning, everyone. My name is Elizabeth Lienesch, and you may or may not know me. I'm the new seminary intern at St. John's. I'm a student at Luther Seminary and I'll be part of the St. John's community for the next two years. It's been wonderful to meet many of you over Zoom or at backyard gatherings this summer, and I'm looking forward to meeting more of you over the next months.

So, you all don't know me that well, but I used to be a person who was usually on time. The key word here is used to. I'd get myself ready, I'd walk out the door, and I'd show up where I needed to be, usually on time.

Then, a little more than a year ago, I had a kid. All of a sudden, the preparation for going anywhere became so much more complicated. Diapers, food, toys. Then someone needs a change. Or some water. Someone has a meltdown, usually me. And suddenly, no matter how early I start getting ready, I'm late. Honestly, I don't want to even begin to think about how it's all going to go when you throw snowsuits and gloves into the mix -- I'm not sure we're ever going to be able to leave the house.

This change in my life makes me think a lot more seriously about all that it takes to get ready. To be prepared.

In today's Exodus reading, we hear the story of the Passover. In this story, God, through Moses, instructs the Israelites on how to prepare for their flight out of slavery. Sacrifice an unblemished lamb. Mark your houses with its blood. Gird your loins. Eat with your shoes on. Be ready. This reading is really all about getting ready. It's detailed instructions for how the Israelites should prepare themselves for the flight from Egypt. It's all about preparation for getting out the door.

This is a moment in our lives when we are all preparing for the unknown. The landscape of the pandemic is ever changing. Case counts go up and down and up again. Schools are open but for how long? Or they're closed. The election looms large in the news, and likely in our minds. What will happen on November 3rd? When will we know election results? What will change in our country after ballots are cast? New cries for racial justice, echoing and amplifying cries that have been sounding throughout our country's entire history make it feel like we are on the precipice of something new. Something unknown.

In this moment, I feel an urgent need to prepare -- to listen, to learn, to build up courage, and to be ready for whatever is next.

But how? How do we prepare ourselves for something that we do not know the shape of? We don't have the detailed list of preparations God gave to Moses. We don't have the to-do list of tasks to cross off. It can feel in this moment like we are facing down the unknown without help, without instructions, without any of the tools we need.

I was feeling exactly this way last weekend. I had read the news which had left me feeling overwhelmed about where to even start trying to make a difference. I felt tired. I wanted someone to just tell me what to do, how to help. I was still feeling this way when I decided to go down to the George Floyd memorial at 38th and Chicago.

So, I hadn't yet been to the memorial. I used to spend a fair amount of time at that intersection. I lived nearby for many years. I got barbecue at the little place next to Cup Foods. An organization I worked with had their offices there. But I hadn't been in the weeks after the murder. I'm not quite sure why. I think I needed some time to prepare myself for what it might be like. What it might mean to see such a familiar place so dramatically changed by those 8 minutes and 46 seconds in May.

When I got there, I sat down on the curb and just tried to take it in. It was surprisingly quiet. Without the usual traffic noise of the intersection, mostly what I heard was the low talking of people visiting the site. But as I settled in and listened more, I began to hear the words of a preacher giving a sermon in the parking lot of a nearby church.

His words were a little muffled by distance, but as I listened, I realized he was preaching on the Romans text that we read today. Specifically, he was talking about Paul's instructions to "put on the armor of light."

I didn't catch all of what he said, but as I sat at the memorial, thinking about all that had happened there and all that is happening now, the refrain "put on the armor of light" kept echoing again and again in my mind.

"Put on the armor of light."

It's certainly not detailed instructions for how to be prepared. But maybe we can look at it as a place to start.

"Put on the armor of light."

In this passage, Paul connects the idea of putting on the armor of light with the idea of waking up from sleep. The invitation to put on the armor of light is an invitation to see the world in a new way. Just like the light of a sunrise slowly illuminates the world, revealing things that were previously hidden, showing us new details that we couldn't see before, the call to put on the armor of light is a call to imagine what could be different.

And not just to imagine it, but to prepare for it and to work for it.

Putting on the armor of light is to be a light in the world, a light that illuminates for ourselves and for the people around us what a different way of living can look like. A way of living that is dedicated to seeking out the Spirit in a world where God can sometimes feel hidden. A way of living where we allow God's light to shine on us and examine our prejudices, assumptions, and

ignorance. A way of living that is rooted in the radical commandment to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The reality is that we will never know exactly how to prepare for what lies ahead of us in our lives. Even the Israelites still had years of wandering in the wilderness ahead of them after they were freed from Pharaoh. And, as much as we might want it to be, the armor of light is not literal armor. It's not equipment that immediately protects us from pain, stops suffering, or prevents harm.

But I do believe that God equips us with what we need to join God in building a more just and joyful world. The armor of light is a gift from God that helps us seek out moments of joy. That helps us ask for what we need from the people around us. That strengthens us as we take actions -- both small and large -- that move us down that long arc towards justice.

For me, as I've thought about the armor of light in my own life, I've borrowed from the Quaker tradition and the way that Quakers talk about holding people in the light. In the moments when I feel most unprepared, overwhelmed, or frightened, I take a deep breath and I am still for a moment. In this stillness, I picture people -- myself, my family, people I love and people I know are suffering -- and I imagine us all encircled in light.

This kind of visualization is not the kind of practice that I usually gravitate towards. But I've found, as I've done this practice, that after this moment of stillness, of remembering people I love, of holding people in my prayers, I feel better and more prepared for what lies ahead. I feel more connected to something bigger than myself. I feel better equipped to go out and join God's work to build the world that I pray for.

Putting on the armor of light will look different for all of us. But I encourage you to think this week about what it might look like for you. What does it mean for you in your life today to gird your loins and put on your sandals? What do you need to go out into the unknown? How is God helping you prepare for whatever comes next?

No matter what your preparations look like, I invite you to walk into that unknown knowing that the Spirit of God is with us, loves us, and will be with us to illuminate our path, no matter what lies ahead.

Amen.