

Getting Ready

Matthew 1:18-25 – First Sunday in Advent

Another Thanksgiving has come and gone and I know it's supposed to be a time to give thanks and reflect upon our blessings, but this time of year can be especially stressful and we run at a frantic pace. All the busy preparations for Thanksgiving are quickly replaced with getting ready for Christmas. And if you didn't get the message before last week, you certainly got it by now. There were the Black Friday sales in which in a number of places began on Thanksgiving day, there was shop small business Saturday, and tomorrow is Cyber Monday. So I know Christmas is still 4 weeks away, but a lot of us begin to get anxious during this season, so much to do, so much planning, activities, shopping, and we wonder how will be get through it. In a Peanuts Cartoon, Charlie Brown says to Linus: "Life is just too much for me. I've been so confused from the day I was born. I think the whole trouble is that we're thrown into life too fast. We're really not prepared." Linus looks at Charlie Brown and replies: "Well, what did you want, a chance to warm up first." I guess many of us with life's busy-ness and jam-packed schedules feel a bit like Charlie Brown. And we would like a chance to warm up first. I would like to think that what the season of Advent is all about. It is our chance to warm up, to prepare ourselves, our chance to get ready for Christmas.

We know in the commercial world, the stores have been getting ready for Christmas, putting up their lights, and trees around Halloween, if not before. But for us personally, we can have all the decorations up, the shopping done, the cards sent, and still not be ready for Christmas. I mean the real message of Christmas, not the Christmas of Christmas sales, Reindeer, tinsel, and expensive gifts. Will be ready to truly celebrate the message of Christ's birth? Will we be able to fully appreciate the message of the most Wonderful Gift given?

And I think back to what it must have been like for those people in the surroundings of the very first Christmas. And were they ready for the birth of the Messiah? It had been 400 years, 400 long years since the last words of prophet Malachi had been written. There were those who had completely

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forgotten the promise of his coming. Words of prophecy like the words from Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Or words from Micah: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel..." Of course, there were those who continued to practice their religious traditions...people who knew the promise of Scripture, but would they also miss the new of Christ's birth? They were so caught up in their religious rituals and practices, they would miss the Messiah in their midst. And there were those whom God had prepared for this special revelation; Persons like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Shepherds out in the field, wise men from the East. People who came understand that the birth of this Child was different than any other birth. That this birth was all about Emmanuel. That God had surely come into the world in this little child.

So what about us? How do we get ready? How do we prepare ourselves for Christmas? How can we make straight the highway for our King? There is much we can do, but let me mention two things this morning for us to consider as we get ready.

The first one comes from Mary, the mother of Jesus. It comes from her own response to this blessed event. For She had in humble obedience expressed her willingness to be God's instrument, she had taken the long journey to Bethlehem, she gave birth in the humble surroundings of animals and hay. And she had witnessed the visit of shepherd who left in amazement. And now the response written in the Gospel of Luke that becomes a clue for our getting ready. The Scripture says: "As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." The first thing that we can do in this Advent season to get ready for Christmas is to find time, make the time for reflection. To ponder anew the meaning and significance of a Savior born for humankind. And that is easier said than done. With all that fills this season, the parties, the shopping, the decorating, the gift wrapping and yes, even the church activities, that can make it challenging to find the time. But we must find the time if we will truly get ready this year. That we will find

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time to be quiet, find time to pray, find time to check our souls and see if we are allowing the culture's celebration keep us from fully allowing the real message of Christmas fill our hearts.

I read about an outstanding man of business by the name of Jay Arthur Rank. Jay had an elevator in his office building that could take him right to his office, but he doesn't use it. Instead he prefers to take the stairs. And not only for the exercise, but he calls the steps up to place of work, his "prayer stairs". He says that he walks up in the morning and prays for God to guide him in every step he takes that day. And he takes each step separately and deliberately as he prays. So in the morning he asks for God's guidance and help and in the evening he walks down the stairs thanking God for his help and blessing for that day. I would have to say that Mr. Rank would be ready for Christmas. Taking time to be in communion with God. I hope each of us in this Advent season can ponder anew what it meant for the God of the universe to enter our world for our salvation. When we can grasp the significance of this glorious event, when we get hold of the message of the incarnation, God becoming One of us, then we can share in the second thing to get ready for Christmas. And that is simply this: We are called to celebrate and share the hope that Christ's coming represents. Today's Advent candle is the candle of hope. When Isaiah gave his proclamation of Jesus coming about 750 years before the baby arrived, things were not good for God's people. They were being oppressed by the Assyrian nation and were waiting for their imminent destruction. They wait in fear. Things weren't going to work out, yet Isaiah called on them to have faith in the Savior that would come.

Now its been over 2000 years since Jesus was born, and we celebrate that birth every year and we need to remind ourselves that Jesus has come already! Just as the people of Israel had longed for a message of hope, we have a word of hope to bring to a world that often feels hopeless and troubled. No doubt, there has been a lot of anxiety and uncertainty expressed in our nation in recent days, there are people who feel unsure about the future, and there may be those of you who feel that way about our personal situations, because of your health, or your job situation, or some

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other difficult place you find yourself in...but the good news is that we are not people without hope. Those who found the Christ child recognized the overwhelming importance of this blessed event. And the shepherds began to tell of their experience of all that they had seen and heard. It was a message that could not be contained. Good news of great joy for all people. That light has come into this world of darkness, we are not left alone, but to have the assurance that yes, God is with us. And we become the messengers of hope and good will. We are called to lift the spirits of those who feel cast down, those who feel frightened, those who are uncertain about their tomorrows.

During the 2nd World War, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, Dr. Merto McDonald was being held as a prisoner of war in a German prison camp. Dr. McDonald told about how he learned of the invasion of Normandy and D-Day. He said early in the morning an American soldier had shook him awake shouting: "A Scotsman wants to see you and it's terribly important." McDonald said he ran over to the barbedwire fence which separated the British and American camps where a fellow by the name of McNeil was waiting for him. He had been in touch with the BBC by underground radio and gave his message to McDonald with just 3 words. "They have come!" McDonald then ran back to the American camp and began waking up the soldiers. He repeated the words again and again: "They have come, they have come!" And the reaction was incredible. These men jumped up and down, they shouted and hugged each other. The German soldiers thought they were crazy. They were still prisoners. Outwardly nothing had changed, but inwardly, they knew that everything was different. Their deliverers were on their way. They have come!.

That is the kind of feeling that stirs our souls in this season of preparation. God has come into this world and into our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. His name is Emmanuel...God is with us. God is with us in the midst of troubled and trying times. God is with you in the midst of whatever you are facing this morning. God is with you in the middle of your fears, doubts, struggles, adversity. God is with us, to give us hope. And we can become

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messengers of that hope to one another, and bearers of that hope to those who feel they have lost it.

I close with words I received this week from one of our missions we support, Urban Promise, a significant mission outreach in Camden. These words came from the director, Bruce Main:

“Laughter and verbose conversation filled the room. Hearing an elderly woman next to me took some effort. I leaned in closer.

“I got up at 6 am each day,” confided my new friend. “I washed sheets, bathed him daily, shopped for groceries. *But I was never really with him.*” Her vulnerability surprised me, especially since we had only met a few minutes earlier. My simple question: “How are you doing?” turned into a confessional about the last year of her husband’s life—a difficult, slow death from Parkinson’s Disease. I hoisted a fork full of vegetable medley to my lips. I chewed quietly and listened.

“That’s my one regret. Does that make sense?” she asked. “Physically I was doing all this stuff, but emotionally I wasn’t there. I never really asked him how he was feeling. He went downhill quickly. Then he was gone.”

My regret-filled friend did all the right things for her dying husband. Her one regret—not being emotionally and spiritually present for him.

Most of us can relate. Buying the right gifts, arriving on time, fighting traffic, cooking the flawless meal, sending that last email, putting up the perfect decorations might occupy our minds and energy this holy season. But in the midst of our frenetic lives, we can forget to be truly present—enjoying friends, family, and strangers in our midst with a listening ear, an attentive spirit, and attuned to what God is doing in our midst. As C.S. Lewis said so beautifully, “Next to the blessed sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”

I pray that this will be more than a season of shopping, and gift giving, and all the wrappings and trappings that accompany Christmas. Let Advent be a time to get ready, to reflect on the reason for the season and then to bring that word of hope to those around us. A time to be present for one another

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and especially for those needing that word of hope. Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let every heart prepare Him room!