

GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS

by Rev. Susan Morrison

First Sunday of Advent

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Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for God.⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.⁸Yet, you are our God; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O God, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

¹Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:³Grace to you and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹God is faithful; by God you were called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13: 24 - 37

“But in those days, after that time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will fall from the sky and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Promised One coming in the clouds with great power and glory; then the angels will be sent to gather the chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Take the fig tree as a parable: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the Promised One is near, right at the door. The truth is, before this generation has passed away, all these things will have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it – neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only God knows. Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come.

It is like people going on a journey. They leave their home and put workers in charge, each with a certain task, and those who watch at the front gate are ordered to stay on the alert. So stay alert! You do not know when the owner of the house is coming, whether at dusk, at midnight, when the cock crows or at early dawn. Do not let the owner come suddenly and catch you asleep. What I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake.”

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Advent has arrived! While still enjoying leftovers from Thanksgiving, it’s already time to get ready for Christmas! Thanks to the Worship Committee and other helpful hands, the sanctuary invites us into the Advent season, adorned in purple and dressed up with greens and twinkling lights. And outside, as the days grow shorter and there is more darkness than light, the candles on the Advent wreath remind us that the coming of Jesus indeed brings God’s light into the world.

The older I get, the more grateful I am for the season of Advent and the counterpoint that it offers to the way that the world invites us to “get ready for Christmas.” Shop ‘til you drop; bake and decorate ‘til you’re exhausted; eat, drink and be merry as you watch the unhealthy pounds and cholesterol weigh in. Yes, each year I grow in my appreciation of the church’s influence on how I get ready for Christmas as it invites us to hold our worldly preparation in tension with our spiritual preparation for Christmas day.

Our scripture lessons on this first Sunday of Advent provide exquisite instruction on how we are to ready ourselves spiritually for the coming of Christ. If we heed the words of the prophet Isaiah and the expectations of St. Paul and the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark, we have a blueprint for these Advent days. Getting ready for Christmas involves

1. repenting, as we reckon with our sinful nature
2. looking to God for Divine intervention
3. engaging in active waiting

In Advent, as in Lent, we begin the season with acknowledgment of our separation from God, a result of those things which we ought not to have done, which we have done; and those things that we have done that we ought not to have done. Traditionally, it's John the Baptist who marches across our Advent landscape calling us to repentance for our sins. But today it's Isaiah who helps us to contemplate our sins. Isaiah acknowledges before God just how far his people, the Israelites, have fallen short of God's intentions. His thoughts are expressed as a communal lament, spoken on behalf of the whole community who find themselves exiled in Babylon, rejected by God because of their sinful ways. "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down" Isaiah cries out on behalf of his people.

I'm reminded of the Tony award-winning play RENT, which is now also a movie. If you're not familiar with the plot, RENT is a tragic yet wonderful story about 8 individuals each dealing with horrendous life circumstances. As they live together on the lower east side of New York City, they become closely bonded through a bohemian-style of life, a story line based on Puccini's LaBohem. In one of the more sadly realistic scenes, several of the friends have gathered in what is called a "Life Support" meeting. It is here the group gathers to help one another through some of life's most difficult moments. At one point in the meeting, a young man quietly asks the ultimate question they are all facing through a haunting song. The lyrics ask, "Will I lose my dignity, will someone care? Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?"

So it is that the Israelites were also asking the same timeless questions, "Will I" or "Have we lost our dignity? Does anyone care? God, do **you** see us? Do **you** care?" Yet at the same time they feel unworthy of God's care. They acknowledge that they are unclean, stained by their deeds. Like a leaf, they have faded and their iniquities, like the wind, have taken them away. At the end of the lament, however, they realize that they are created by God. God is the potter and they are the clay. Therefore, there is hope that with repentance will come new beginnings and knowledge that God's love is so great that it will never fail.

Advent. It's the beginning of a whole new year in the life of the church. And it begins with repentance as we admit our complicity in a world riddled with violence and greed. With Isaiah we plead to God: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

And then, having acknowledged our sin, we then turn to a God who responds to our transgressions as a potter to clay, ever ready to remold us and remake us in God's own image. Therein lies our hope. As expressed by Paul Tillich in his famous sermon *The Shaking of the Foundations*, we are strengthened by nothing that we can create or achieve, but are sustained solely by God's steadfast love and goodness.

Advent is God's response to a ruthless world. The heavens do open and God comes to us through the incarnation, God-in-the-flesh and through the life and teachings of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Alienation is transcended and human sinfulness is overcome. "God is faithful" declares St. Paul. It is up to us to ready ourselves for the coming again and again and again of Christ into our lives.

Getting ready for Christmas means looking to God for Divine intervention. Advent has everything to do with the coming of God into our lives, the birth of Jesus being but one form of God's intervention. Daily, we wait eagerly and expectantly for signs of God. "To watch" is not to scan the heavens, to read the horoscope, to stand by and wait for God to come. Mark's gospel makes it quite clear that Jesus desires Active Waiting on our part. It is as though a master, absent on a journey, has left the servant in charge, each with work to be done, with a keeper at the door. Christ will come and with signs that no one will miss. In the meantime, Jesus' followers are to keep awake; to engage in active waiting by being faithful to their work as though they were already in the presence of the One for whose coming their hearts are eager and open.

Getting ready for Christmas? Surely we can be more faithful in our active waiting this year! In a recent Earth Letter, a publication that comes from Earth Ministry in Seattle, Washington, readers were invited to consider the following question:

What one decision or action can I make this Christmas season to actively and intentionally promote the nonviolent love brought into the world through the birth of Jesus?

What a remarkable way to get ready for Christmas! Such nonviolent action might be in what we purchase or where we seek entertainment; where we make our voices heard; the books we read; the conversations we enter or leave; how we use the gift of time in the next 24 Advent days and especially how we shop for the holiday.

In the midst of the current economic downturn, we all will be more challenged as we make our shopping lists for Christmas. Hopefully, the traditional need to buy gifts in order to express our love, will be rethought this year. We'll be more careful of the consumer culture's grip, and be wary of increasing our credit card debt.

In a recent article in Circuit Rider, a United Methodist publication, Marti Zimmerman wrote a thoughtful article titled "Shopping for the Glory of God." She suggests that we ask ourselves five questions before we make a holiday purchase. You will find a small card printed with these five questions in your bulletin. I hope that you will keep it in your wallet while shopping this Advent season.

The first question is "**Do I need this item?**" Shopping starts with needs – shelter, food, transportation, clothing, health care. If advertising has its way, wants become needs. What used to be a luxury item has now become a necessity. So when it comes to purchasing a gift, ask yourself "Does my loved one need this? Will it make a long-term difference in their well being?"

The second question is "**Can I afford it?**" Jesus suggested in Luke 14:27 that before we do anything that we sit down and estimate the cost to see if we have enough to complete the task. Holiday gifts – just like food, clothing, fuel, and charitable giving – need to be part of a budgeted spending plan, considered only after the necessities of life are taken care of. If you have to buy the gift on credit, with no plan to pay it off come January, then rethink what you're buying and choose something else that you can afford.

The next two questions respond to Jesus' call to love your neighbor as yourself. **“Under what conditions was this item produced?”** We live in a global economy. Are the people who made it paid enough to support their families? Is it a fair trade item? And **“Where will the product end up?”** When you or your loved one is done with it, will it go to a land-fill, become toxic waste, be re-sold or given away, or just become clutter? Will the earth suffer from our desire to give?

And finally, **Is there a significant gift for the birthday boy, Jesus?”** Is there a significant gift for Jesus, who calls us to account for how we live our financial lives? Ask yourself: Am I planning to give at least 10% of what I will spend this holiday for food and drink and cards and gifts on something that would please Jesus? What is my love gift for the Holy Child? It might be a Christmas gift to the church; it might be finding alternative gifts at the Alternative Christmas Market – gifts that give twice; it might be gifting a favorite charity. After all, it is Jesus' birthday that we're celebrating. What will his gift be this year?

Five simple questions - questions that will help us all make faith-filled shopping choices this Christmas and will offer what Walter Bruggemann calls “a counter-script to the consumer culture in which we live.” Bill McKibbin, well known for his own economic counter-script, has expressed this thought. “The point is to emerge from Christmas relaxed, contented, happy to have kept this season; to emerge closer to your family than you were when Advent began; to emerge with some real sense that Christ has come into your world.

Getting ready for Christmas....spiritual preparedness...can we? will we find the time
to acknowledge and repent of our sins
to look to God for Divine intervention
and then to find ways to engage in active waiting, making good choices about the
way that we spend our time and our resources

I wish for you a blessed Advent this season as you get ready for Christmas!
Amen and Amen.