

GETTING READY

Romans 13: 11-14; Matthew 24: 36-44

How do we get ready for some significant event, for some important meeting, for someone special? How do we prepare for a critical exam? How do we prepare for an important doctor's visit or major surgery? How do we prepare to confront someone with the truth, with something they will be upset about, with something that will change their life and ours?

Depending on what it is we are preparing for, we rely on any previous life experience that can help us. Where have we felt really successful in preparation? Where have we failed to be as prepared as we should have been?...

But sometimes we don't have the kind of experience that can necessarily help us prepare to face something ahead. We need people who can walk with us, people who have maybe been through something similar, people who have knowledge and skills appropriate to our need...

But then there's always an element of the unknown, an element that we must face ourselves and alone. Even if someone is there beside us, even with all the support and help we can get, we have to find something in us, some inspiration, strength or ability... Maybe we need to find something we already have inside us as potential, but maybe it's also something only God can give us or draw forth from us. Is God a factor in our preparation?

This is what our readings this morning are all about. That's what this first season of the church year we call Advent is all about. It's all about preparation. But preparation for what? Advent is preparation for the coming of Christ. Christ came as a child and that's the message about Christmas we know best. But the bible also talks about Christ coming again in glory. And when Christ comes again in glory, the world will become on earth what it is in heaven – a place of peace, joy, abundance and care for all life. But between the first and second coming of Christ, each Advent is also a kind of coming of Christ. Each Advent is an invitation to prepare for a spiritual coming of Christ into our hearts and our lives in a new way. The question is: are we ready?

Well, each season of Advent, like each year in our lives, is different. Life changes and we change. Some change is awesome. It's about new relationships and new opportunities, new growth, new accomplishments, new reasons to celebrate... But every year is also about changes that involve loss, a discovery of how contingent life is, how fragile and vulnerable relationships are. We grow

older but not necessarily stronger. With the joys also come hurts. With the certainty of long held relationships also come the vulnerability of the tenuousness of things, of trust broken, confidences betrayed, loneliness, disappointment, inner questioning, even despair... every year can be a life time lived, some of it wonderful and life-changing, some of it terrifying and disorienting...

And so, every season of Advent as we hear the stories, sing the hymns, reflect and meditate, each and every season of Advent is an opportunity to integrate all the changes in our lives within a larger spiritual meaning. We bring into our preparations our hopes and our fears, our longings and our disappointments, our joys and our hurts. We have grown in our believing in some ways, but we are also caught by unbelief in other ways. We have gathered some wisdom, some courage and some compassion, but we have also been caught by feelings of desperation, shakiness, confusion, aggravation and resentment... We have tasted abundance, found a new rhythm of peace and a new melody of joy, but we have also been disrupted by the discord of conflict in our relationships and dis-ease in our minds and bodies.

How do we prepare for Christ to find us and for us to find Christ in a whole new way relevant to where we are at this very point in our lives this Christmas?

Let me make three brief points based on our scripture readings.

First, are we capable of anticipation? Are we open to expectation? Are we ready for fresh hope? Listen to our reading from Romans: "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is gone, the day is near..." This is the language of anticipation, expectation, a summons to hope. Advent is a season where we anticipate, expect and hope for something, something life-giving and life-changing. Maybe it won't be dramatic and sudden, maybe it will be quiet, gradual and deeply internal. Maybe it's all about perspective, insight, self-discovery, inspiration. Maybe it's about intangible yet foundational virtues like faith, hope and love which will come alive for us and find new avenues to engage specific circumstances in our lives. Maybe it will be a fresh appreciation for a particular person or the importance of community, or a new passion. Maybe it will be an opening to compassion and care for others in a new way. Maybe we will find new joy in generous giving, maybe greater freedom from material things, freedom from petty desires and attachments that create envy and comparison with others, demeaning our humanity. But whatever it is, without anticipation, expectation or hope, nothing will come alive in a new way for you or me this Christmas.

So then, in this season of Advent, begin your prayers by asking God to give you anticipation, expectation and hope in a new way relevant to the changes in

your life at this time... Put some content into what you anticipate and hope for, but also, leave it open. What we ask for is not necessarily what we need most, and we need to be open to what can come as a total surprise...

Second, Advent is a time to clean house, inner house, spiritual house. Listen to another part of our reading from Romans: "Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy..." Why do people get sickly drunk or totally high on drugs or immersed and obsessed in a life of debauchery? There may be many reasons, but one big one is to numb the senses, suppress the pain, the hurt, the fear, the stress, the despair... There is dread, bitterness and frustration we want to forget. The problem is, we will never find what we're looking for – fullness of life and inner peace.... We will never find it this way. All we are doing is anesthetizing ourselves from the pain of living... for a little while... and in the mean-time we are hurting other people and hurting ourselves too... And when we do this, we are also revealing that we have lost hope, we have forgotten what it means to expect anything good, to anticipate any life-giving possibility, anything beautiful and astonishing...

So then, to prepare in this season of Advent for the true gift of Christmas – a spiritual encounter with Christ - we have to pray sincerely for anticipation, expectation and hope. And second, we have to be prepared to tackle the obstacles to that kind of sincerity – all those habitual practices in our lives that can fill us with anger at others and jealousy of them... toxic habits that numb us into avoidance and escape from our lives rather than facing life's challenges constructively with courage and openness to new meaning and new direction...

Maybe we need help to do this... we need to face that too, and maybe that's the message we need to hear most this Christmas... We need to consciously and intentionally get some help and guidance to clean house and clear the baggage that weighs us down and poisons our spirits...

So then, step one is cultivating a spirit of anticipation, expectancy and hope. Step two is doing some work to clear the negative stuff in our lives that gets in the way of a positive spirit of hope...

But third and finally, there is an additional step we have to take, and it's a practice we aren't necessarily very good at as people in a noisy world full of distractions. Our reading from the gospel is also about preparation. Jesus refers to what the people were doing in the days of Noah right before the flood. Why did they not see the signs? Why did they not listen to the warnings? Why were they not paying attention? "For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the flood came and swept

them all away..." they missed it... they were blind... they were distracted with busyness, with life, with whatever, and they missed it... They missed the catastrophe... But Jesus also refers to his coming as something people will miss for the very same reasons... Jesus wants to come again and again to grow in us new faith, hope and love.

So how can we make sure we don't miss the most important things because we are distracted with less important things?...

Not only do we have to pray for expectation, anticipation and hope. And not only must we get help with our obsessions, addictions, distractions, aggravations, jealousies and resentments.... Not only this... but we must develop an ability to pay attention to our soul, to become authentic seekers after God and listeners for God. We need to develop the ability to see spiritually not only others but see into our own heart. We need to develop the courage of honesty and repentance, as well as the heart to forgive. We need to discern our self-deceptions, excuses, and blame of others for what is also our own responsibility.

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves: In what ways am I true to myself as a child of God, and in what ways am I not?... Think about your relationships... Think about your responsibilities... Think about the opportunities and temptations before you... Think about those things you feel good about, but also those things you don't feel good about... Here's another question: Where is the gap between what I should be and what I am, the choices I need to make and the choices I have made to do nothing or do the wrong thing?... And here's another question: What is my biggest challenge and my biggest sin? Is it apathy and complacency about doing something? Is it impatience and judgementalism where I should have greater compassion and understanding? Is it the kind of preoccupation with myself that prevents me from really listening, paying attention, allowing myself to feel, empathize and understand?...

You know, the exercise of putting into words the questions I need to ask of myself before God is one of the most profound ways toward sincerity and attentiveness before God. I guarantee you, if you can come to questions like this that challenge you to be more authentic with yourself and others this season of Advent, things will happen in your spirit this Christmas. Christ will visit you... your prayer and meditation, in worship with others or by yourself, will bear fruit...

Expectancy, anticipation, hope....

Clearing the way, inner cleansing, letting go...

Learning to formulate questions so that we become more sincere and authentic with ourselves and others....

Let us pray: O God, send your Christ to us this Christmas... Send your Christ into our hearts... Amen.