

Preparing

Psalm 25:1-10

Epistle: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Gospel: Luke 21:25-36

Lesson: Jeremiah 33:14-16 (Courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

33:14 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

33:15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

33:16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

A friend of mine from Seminary wrote about his upcoming preparations for the 1st Advent worship on his Facebook page, and a friend of his responded, "Just remember, you're preparing to start a spiritual adventure. What [does one] need to do before taking the most important trip in your life?" It made me think. How often do I think that this year's Advent is the beginning of an adventure? Often times my focus is on all the things I have to do by Christmas. And those "have to-s" are often more in the line of "things I've always done" mixed in with "things I've seen other's do that made me want to do the same."

When I think of Advent I think of cookies and shopping and redecorating and Advent calendars and cooking and baking and visiting and singing - even my meditations seem like "a thing to do" more than an opportunity - and *nothing* like a preparation for an adventure.

When I reflect honestly, I believe another of my Advent traditions is to complain about how commercial this season has become. Which, I guess, sounds noble on the one hand - but it isn't really very constructive nor is it spiritual - it is just whining.

And in spite of my impressions about Advent being too busy and not spiritual and too commercial - I don't really change my traditions much, because I like them. I like the work that goes into preparing for Christmas, because I really like how special those Christmas days can be. What gets me through Advent - and even Christmas - is the after Christmas glow. Like the old toothache joke - it feels so good when the pain goes away. Christmas is something amazing and wonderful when the presents have all been unwrapped, the leftovers are in the fridge, the home is all cleaned up and dressed up, the music can really be heard now, and there is just this sense of contentedness.

Advent is the preparation for a journey, and sometimes our homes represent that journey. How we live - how we treat each other - what we take time to do - who we have in our homes - who we visit - all these things may take time, but tell us a lot about our priorities.

Thanks to Becky DeLameter for the new banners and Paraments, and Janice who helped her some, all those who came yesterday for the Hanging of the Greens - we have redecorated, have a feeling of newness and freshness, and perhaps this could be like a new beginning! But there is a touch of the old and familiar as well.

So, what does one need to do before taking the most important trip in their life? That is what we should be thinking about this very first day of Advent, because we only have four Sundays to prepare! And every year on Advent we can begin on a new adventure.

Now, Family Smith has prepared often for journeys. Very often. If I don't see another suitcase for a while I will be very pleased. And each of us in the family has our own way of packing, which one can imagine with a general understanding of our different personalities.

So, knowing *that*, I think I can say with certainty that there is no *one* way to be prepared for Christ's birth in our hearts that fits everyone. Not for packing for a trip and definitely not for a spiritual journey.

BUT there are some general guidelines I could suggest.

First of all, I say we should separate our worldly preparations from our spiritual ones. Some people, when they pack, they make lists and then lay everything out in nice piles on the bed before putting in the suitcase, separating what needs to be in carryon and what needs to be in the suitcase. Carryon luggage is what we need to get us to our destination - like getting us through Advent - that's the cookies, the shopping, the decorating, etc.

In the suitcase is what we'll need when we eventually get to our destination, to make sure our trip is successful. So we need to try to make *very clear* during Advent, what we are doing for our spiritual well being. And then plan it - prioritize it - make it happen.

A spiritual fundamental necessary to being with God is to make an appointment - let's say "book the trip". Now that may sound silly, but I'll try to put it another way. When we don't have the time to listen, to calm ourselves, to focus on that still small voice, we won't even get to begin our trip! Our goal is to find our way through all our "humanness" to feel God's presence, and we have to regulate it in our lives - it won't just happen on its own.

Another step in the preparation is to think about the journey as we do our everyday things. Like working out before we leave by walking more, stopping and being aware of our surroundings, imagining what it will be like when we get there. We can start any moment imagining what God would have us do and be in the present moment. What can we do for the kingdom?

And let us not forget to take seriously what we already do. Often times we do wonderful things - like donate money for the Clarksburg kids, or even writing our Christmas cards - but we do them as a task we can check off our list and not sit and be thankful that we can and are doing this. We need to value all that we do, because it helps us to be in the mindset of God, of thankfulness - it keeps us practicing being aware of the holy around us.

Our Sermon text from Jeremiah is often used to show what kind of a Messiah Jesus was going to be. We are to be prepared for a Messiah where justice, righteousness, and safety are fulfilled! And we have a Christ that tells us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, to love our neighbors, to serve, to sacrifice, to protect. We can practice having our eyes and ears open in our everyday moments for opportunities to enact with others in Christ's name. Working out - practicing our faith while preparing for the journey. We can do that anytime - it points the way to greater awareness of God.

So let's see - separate our packing - get clear lines between what we do to prepare for our holidays and what we do to prepare for our holy experiences. Then book the trip - purposely make a plan for *when* we are going to do *what*, to hear God's voice. Then practice in the everyday - apply what we have experienced in the everyday. Be merciful, practice patience, stand up for those who need to be protected, and offer kindness as often as possible.

A spiritual journey is not easy to go on when full of fear. For thousands of years we have known this. Our gospel today mentions this. Luke writes, "Be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed

down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." It's hard to soar like an eagle when you are flying with the vultures, which end up going in circles.

It's impossible to feel the presence of love of hope of truth and faith when our souls are blinded by false wisdom. So a final suggestion before the trip - work on ridding ourselves of any fears and anxieties we might have. Trust that God is real, and let go of the desire to tell the pilot how to fly the plane.