

12.13.2023 Advent Midweek 2, Reflection
Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 19:28-40

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

“Prepare the way – think and do”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The theme for the second week of Advent is summarized in the word “Prepare.” To prepare is an action that is by no means passive; rather, preparing is about thinking and doing. Another way of saying it is: Preparing is about planning and carrying out the plan.

So much of Advent is, for better or for worse, tied to cultural customs that often seem to have little to do with the planning and carrying out of our mission as Christians in this world. Decorating, baking, cooking, gathering, gift-giving, and the like are all wonderful cultural customs that feel good, but often leave me wondering what they have to do with our preparing of the way for the Messiah. Each of these things, of course, can arguably be pressed into service of that goal, or at least explained that way. For example, we illuminate our homes and community with lights, remembering that Christ is the light of the world. We prepare and share our food as a sign that as we have been fed by Christ, so we feed others. We give gifts as a tangible sign of our love for others, just as we have received God’s grace and love in the word and sacraments. Yet rarely do I hear the cultural Christmas explained in this way. Perhaps there has always been a tension between cultural customs and the faith that they are based upon.

Advent is a season that gets lost in the shuffle of our increasingly secular world’s take on Christmas. In the early church, Advent was originally a subdued and prayerful season very much like Lent. This was, of course, long before today’s commercialized Christmas season. Yet today, for Advent to make any sense to folks following a liturgical calendar, we need to reflect upon this week’s theme – “Prepare.” We are preparing, not for the birth of a perpetual baby Jesus, but for the coming of the Messiah who brings peace and reconciliation, gathering one flock of many nations. This has already begun, and we know him in our hearts and in his body the church.

Tonight’s reading from Philippians captures the spirit of Advent. *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”* Rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious. Let your requests be known to God in prayer. This time of the year can make even the most calm and confident person, anxious and agitated. We might say, Advent is the necessary “corrective” to our holiday

season madness that helps give focus to the deeper meaning of this season.

Tonight's appointed gospel is usually read on Palm Sunday, so it may seem a bit strange to read this in December while we are baking cookies and singing carols. However, it is crucial that we see that the one for whom we are waiting is not a baby Jesus, helpless and in need of our care and raising; but rather, the one for whom we wait is the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, Christ Jesus. He comes not to be cared for in the manger, but comes to call humanity into discipleship and service; he comes to lead us on the way of the cross and service to our neighbor; he comes to bring peace, reconciliation, and unity to the nations.

This year, Advent comes at a time when the world has less unity and is in more need of peace and reconciliation than at any time in recent memory. Daily we see horrific images of war, destroyed cities and communities, hungry and displaced people in many nations. In our own nation, we see the stark contrast between wealth and poverty, and daily we see the ongoing domestic discord of our own national house, signaling anything but national unity. To be honest it feels a bit callous to simply ignore these realities and celebrate Christmas. Advent helps us remember that we are preparing the way of the Messiah who calls us to follow him in self-emptying service for others. Advent and Christmas are about preparing to meet and follow Jesus over whatever ground he leads us throughout our lives.

In tonight's reading from Philippians, Paul writes, "*The Lord is near,*" reminding us that Christians know and sense the nearness of God in this world. Advent is a moment to, as Paul says, simply "think" about whatever is true and honorable, just, and pure, so that we can as Paul writes, "do" these things. Thinking and doing are important parts of preparing the way of "*the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

What are things we can prepare to do in the coming church year that will be signs of peace, reconciliation, and unity to the nations? Advent is a time to prepare for Christ among us in the new church year. He accompanies you all year, encouraging you to think and do for him in this world.

There is a certain peace that passes all understanding that comes from thinking and doing Christ's work. It is a peace that the world can never give or even know unless it knows the Messiah. The Lord has need of you. Like the disciples sent to borrow the colt that Jesus would ride, Jesus has need of you to prepare his way in this world. Take time to think and pray in Advent.

To walk with Jesus is to walk on holy ground. The crowds on Palm Sunday knew this and said, “*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*” The path over which you travel with him is holy ground because he travels with you.

The truth about Jesus is so compelling that even “*the very stones would cry out.*” The paving stones on that Palm Sunday roman road over which Jesus rode, were the holy ground upon which he traveled. The stones, and all along the roadsides of this world – the homes, the cities, and the nations – continue to cry out for peace, reconciliation, and unity. Today, all the world groans and cries out for the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The stones and rubble of cities destroyed in our human madness cry out for peace, reconciliation, and unity.

What is Jesus encouraging you to think about and how is he calling you to act for him? Travel with him during Advent and throughout the year. The Lord is near. In everything by prayer let your requests be made known to him.

Do not be anxious. You are traveling with him upon holy ground. Amen.