

As we begin this season of Advent, I remind us that the word Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning 'arrival'. It's a season of preparation, built around four consecutive Sundays that precede Christmas. Again, it's a season of preparation for the arrival or coming of our Lord. And I further remind us that it's meant to consider not one, but two very different arrivals or comings of Christ. In a couple of weeks, our focus will shift to the coming of Jesus the newborn child, our baby-king, with all its meaning.

But that's not where we begin. We enter Advent focusing on his coming at the end of times. We are told in many parts of the Scriptures, including today's Gospel, that there will be an end of times and that it will prompt Jesus' return: *"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man....For you do not know on which day your Lord will come"*. But then he adds, *"So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."* We know this, but it's good to remind ourselves: like Lent, it's a season intended to prepare us. In this case, for his coming.

First of all, why bother? Especially when it's shrouded in so much mystery and whatever frustrations that brings. We're left not knowing when or how it's going to happen, yet instructed to be ready as though it could happen today. But frankly it's easy to doubt that he would come today, or even tomorrow, or for that matter, in our lifetimes.

The Scriptures describe Jesus' coming and the end times as something like a groom, coming to claim his bride. That sounds a little vague and maybe not all that meaningful. So perhaps another way to say it, is that it's the moment we make a formal movement toward life in heaven. So what is exactly is heaven? Sometimes the sparse details given us in the Scriptures make it sound as though we'll be frozen into place, singing some unending song to God. Admittedly, that doesn't tend to be our immediate notion of paradise. But in trying to connect the dots on the assorted details God gives us, we would say that it's much more than that. We're told that in some way, it's human-life dialed up to an entirely higher pitch, as though we live in 3-D, but will then live in 4-D. And more: it's life free from all that fights against it—true and complete communion with each other, through God, free of the causes for fear, of hopes that are disappointed, freedom from our disordered desires and freedom from our persistent wanting for things that never satisfy. That's the experience for which we were made. It's that experience that God wants for us.

That sounds great, but what does it mean to prepare for all that, in Advent or any other time? But again, why bother? What's the point and what's at stake? We're told that when Jesus eventually comes, we will be accountable for whatever ways we don't prepare for that ultimate goal. For those who want no part of it, who prefer to be separated from God, God will not force them into heaven. If separation is what they desire, separation will be granted. That's what we call hell. But for those of us who desire it in some way, even if we don't give our hearts completely over to that desire, there will be more work to do on the other side of death—burning away whatever needs to be burned away, so that our hearts can become pure, conformed to God's design—hearts only for God.

We do well to live always in the spirit of that desire. In some ways we do, but we drift from it. Advent calls us snap back into it. Advent calls us to live like we're already there. I remember when I was going through RCIA, I knew that in the waters of baptism, I would be cleansed of all my sins—every sin. In those days before, I conceivably could have thought, *"I might as well live it up! I'm going to be forgiven anyway."* A person of living faith would have told me, *"No, that's not living in the spirit of what awaits you. If you do live in the spirit of it, it will be something more than mere ritual accompanied by spoken words. It will be living moment in which God does something within you, changes you from within—what God intends it to be and wants it to be."*

It's similar with couples who come to us for marriage and are cohabitating. First of all, I remind them that I love them, that my point is not to shame them, but that I cannot proceed with them unless they are prepared to live chastely, like brother and sister, until their wedding day. I tell them they need to live in the spirit of what awaits them. I remind them that as a sacrament, God does something to that couple on their wedding day, He changes them. Through grace, He forges them into Himself. Again, it's more than mere spoken words and a ritual exchange of rings. By virtue of that, they are different than they

are when they're cohabitating. And so I say to such couples, *"Prepare for it. From this day until your wedding, live in the spirit of what God intends for you, and if you do, you're wedding day will be what God hopes for it, what you hope for it. As something new, you will discover each other on your wedding day, in a new and more beautiful way."*

And so for us, all of our lives, we are to live in the spirit of what God desires for us, what He has planned for us. Advent calls us to get back to preparing for it—a fuller, more complete life, even if we don't know when and how it will be ushered in. We are to prepare by living in the spirit of it, and considering what it means to us.

Take some time as individuals and families to do the little things that focus on this. For one, slow down. Make some time for quiet, uninterrupted prayer. Give God some space in your day just to be with you, and maybe even to speak with you. Even if it's only five or ten minutes each day, make it happen. In whatever way you're strapped for time, I remind you that no act of love offered for God is ever lost. It will come back to you, and all the other things that seem so important will fall into place as they need to.

Perhaps in that time, read one of our Advent companion booklets—the *Little Blue Book* or the *Magnificat Companion*. It even helps to have an Advent wreath or an Advent calendar at home. They're beautiful reminders of what awaits us, to live in the spirit of Jesus' coming.

Another way to prepare is to live in that kingdom of justice and peace by taking a tag from our parish's Jesse Tree in the Gathering Space. It will give you a way to help someone in need, and to do so in the name of this same Jesus whom we await. And more than just providing a gift, take some time to pray for whomever is going to receive it.

But also there is the tradition of making a Jesse Tree for your home. Our Middle School youth and our Faith Formation children, as well as their parents, were introduced to this last Sunday. It's a beautiful tradition that guides us into reflecting on the messages of the Jewish prophets, words that offered hope to those who were discouraged, to live in anticipation for their promised Messiah, the Christ. These stories remind us that just as the Israelites needed to be reminded and to prepare for Jesus' first coming, so do we for his second coming (for more details see: <http://www.criovoice.org/jesse.html>).

Jesus tells us to stay awake and to make our hearts ready, because his coming to us could come at any time. In fact, most likely when we're not expecting it. Brothers and sisters, if we aren't intentional about it and protective of this time for God, the conveyor belt that our culture calls the 'Holiday Season' will carry us along without our even knowing it. It's a very different focus, and it hardly bears in mind what God has planned for us. Let us put our stake in the ground—time for God, to bear in mind his coming, and what it will mean for us. And as we live, let us live like we're there, in the spirit of what God intends.