



Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (December 1, 2024)

Thanksgiving is behind us and Christmas is a few weeks away. We have but a short time to “prepare for Christmas:” Let the madness begin!

Or has it already started?

I’ve heard Christmas music already played in stores even before we got to celebrate Thanksgiving. Christmas lights, yard figurines and inflatables are on. Check lists are being created: events to attend, parties to plan, shopping for food, gifts, decorations, baking, meal preparation, more decorations...

Holiday commercialization sets up a trap. Our hurried society demands business and promises consumer joy. It can be a stressful distraction to a different and much more needed preparation. We act as if we need to get ready for each other’s Birthday, forgetting the One whose Birthday it is after all.

Advent is the Season that reminds Christians what it is all about.

When we ask one another, “**Are you ready for Christmas?**” what we want to know is not whether one has decked the halls, completed all the expected shopping, wrapped all the gifts, and baked enough fruitcake. What we want to know is whether we are re-focusing, re-aligning, and re-committing ourselves to the One who has come and will come again.

What we want to know is if we are ready to embrace again with trust and hope the news that God entered into our fleshly life.

God has chosen to be this close to us, to be born just as one of us, squeezed through a birth canal, covered with amniotic fluid, and shocked by the cold air that receives a new-born baby.

What we want to know is whether we are ready to **consider once again the “Why:”** Why did God decide to be born in our midst; to a humble and peasant couple; to an impoverished and desolate people, in a scarred country invaded and occupied by a foreign army, and in a world enveloped in political terror, corruption, and manipulation?

Preparing for Christmas means pondering on the story yet again, considering God’s favor for a broken humanity, rejoicing at the fact that we matter to God.

Preparing for Christmas means acknowledging and celebrating that God sees us, that God hears the cry of the poor, that those who suffer and despair are not forgotten, that those abused and exploited by the powerful are precious in the eyes of the Lord.

Preparing for Christmas means recommitting ourselves to follow the Prince of Peace and his nonviolent choices. It means letting his Word of life inspire and renew us. It means re-dedicating us to bringing healing, compassion, and mercy to a world afflicted by the curse of fear, the scar of division, and the sin of injustice.

Preparing for Christmas means revisiting the promises of God and the fulfilment of those promises with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the non-violent Christ.

Mary described that well when, after being proclaimed mother of her Lord by her cousin Elizabeth,¹ she exploded in the song known as the Magnificat:²

[God's] mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.³

With Mary we acknowledge that our God cannot stand injustice, and sides with the last and the least.

Preparing for Christmas means preparing for God's kingdom to come, for the Lord's second coming when all will be well and reconciled, when all creation will enjoy the Lord's Shalom.

Advent is a reminder that we live between times: the first and the second coming, the fulfilling of the promises with Jesus' birth and the final completion of the promises when he comes again.

Advent is an invitation to wait. Our culture spurns waiting. We can't wait for a webpage to download fast enough, for our boarding to be over with more quickly, for the doctor not to take long in calling us with test results, for the waiter to bring our food soon.

¹ Luke 1:41-45

² Luke 1:46-55

³ Luke 1:50-53

We demand quick replies, overnight deliveries, and instant gratification. Even in church, we yearn can't wait for Advent to be over and be allowed to sing Christmas carols. Mary waited nine months to see Jesus and we can't wait a month.

Patience is not a virtue we cultivate.

Author and pastor AJ Sherrill reminds us that Mary modeled Advent for us. He writes: "She demonstrated for us what happens inside a person when they create space for something better."⁴

He goes on to clarify what he means:

Advent waiting allows God time to do deep work in us. But we must not confuse waiting with an invitation to fall into apathy, laziness, or despair. We wait in hope, expectantly vigilant for God to complete what he has begun. Active waiting is the call of the Church.

As we wait, we relinquish the urge to see things happening right now, even the things of God that we pray for: peace, justice, healing, community. We remit ourselves to the "time" chosen by God, a time still obstructed by evil and resistance to God. But we do not surrender the promise of Shalom, we do not grow weary, we do not fall victims to hopelessness. We persist in trust.

This is how we cooperate with God in advancing the coming of the kingdom. We work in hope, in the present moment, not discouraged and not helpless, affirming the truth of God and the pedagogy of God's ways.

⁴ AJ Sherrill, *Rediscovering Christmas*, p.5

God is still at work in mysterious ways, in the silence, in the darkness, making new things, healing grieving hearts, and renewing all things.

There where hearts are broken, where lights are dimmed, where the future is obscure and hope elusive, God the Emmanuel is active through the gentle presence, patient listening, and healing touch of people like you and me.

Listen to a food pantry story shared by Nancy T.:

My first day at the food pantry was in March. I met a very polite young man that lived in the woods next to our church. He explained to me that he worked at a Cracker Barrel and was trying to find a better job as a chef. He said he wasn't making enough money to live at his current job. He had a better job before he moved to Florida to be closer to his daughter.

The young man came back two months later and said he got a job at an Italian restaurant as a chef. The owner of the restaurant gave him a place to live, and the young man became head chef. He does not live in our woods any longer. Although he is very happy [to have a better accommodation], he says that everyone in the woods is very nice to each other and helps each other out.

With Psalm 146:5 we pray:

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

May the waiting time of Advent be pregnant with the presence of God at work, creating anew, and strengthening us with renewed hope. Amen.