

Preparations for His Coming

As I said last Sunday, “advent” means coming, especially the coming or arrival of something or someone extremely important. In this season of Advent in the church we are looking forward to the coming and arrival of Jesus, His arrival to Bethlehem, His arrival in our hearts, His arrival again at the end of history as we know it.

Something I’ve noticed about being ready to welcome someone important is that being ready is preceded by preparation. I don’t know how it was at your house earlier this week, but my house was a little on the tense side. There were a lot of preparations that took place to celebrate Thanksgiving and to prepare our house and the food to welcome our children and grandchildren, and our friends from Pittsburgh. Betty Jane went grocery shopping, we spent several hours straightening and cleaning house. Many hours went into the cooking and baking. I got myself into trouble a couple of times for not doing things the way Betty Jane wanted them done.

When it was all said and the food was all “et” and the day was done, we had a wonderful Thanksgiving. But, it didn’t happen without a lot of preparation. I’ll bet we are not the only ones who prepared to celebrate Thanksgiving. Our Christmas celebration will be even more preparation intensive. There will be more decorations and presents in addition to more food. Careful preparation will be required to get the outcome we desire.

But this raises a question, if it requires preparation to celebrate the traditions of the season, how much more preparation might it require to actually welcome the Lord, welcome Him into our world, into our innermost beings, and into the future? What preparations should we make to welcome Him? And what is at stake in these preparations?

Let’s begin with our own innermost lives; how are we to prepare to welcome Jesus there? Today’s reading in our Advent devotional booklet for this year begins like this:

At this time, close upon the heels of Thanksgiving, come the papers and magazines, their columns teeming with Christmas announcements, advertisements, bargains, illustrated stories. The holiday craze of Christmas shopping is already taking possession of the public mind, and the atmosphere is becoming tremulous with the holiday spirit.

2

But the question may well be raised whether in the holiday whirl of Christmas shopping, bargain hunting, present making and pleasure seeking, the grand, central historic fact of the Advent of our Christ to redeem a lost world is not lost sight of—almost, if not altogether?

This is true, isn’t it? Betty Jane commented on the massive size of Thursday’s Altoona Mirror. The paper was stuffed full of flyers advertising black Friday sales. Just when we ought to be preparing our hearts to receive the gentle whisper of Jesus’ presence, we are urged by the world to make a mad, competitive dash to the department stores.

It’s really not that different from the mad dash to motel rooms going on the night Jesus was born. People were out looking for room and board, creature comforts for themselves and for their families. There were more people than the little town of Bethlehem could comfortably handle. Stop and think about that for a moment. Bethlehem was crowded with people almost all of whom missed the miracle that happened in their midst. Shepherds from the hillsides got to see Him. Eventually, wise men from afar got to see Him, but all the others were so preoccupied with their worldly concerns—food, shelter, griping about taxes, cursing the politicians—that they missed God’s arrival. How tragic and how scary, considering that the same thing could just as easily happen to us.

One of our favorite Christmas carols challenges us: “Let every heart prepare Him room.” The first preparation to welcome His coming begins in the interior parts of every heart. As hard and as impossible as it may seem, we need to swim upstream against the flow and pressures of the secular holiday and seek not the spirit of Christmas but the Spirit of Christ. We need to quiet ourselves, do some stargazing, perk up our spiritual eyes and ears to the appearance and to the singing of angels, pay attention to our dreams, and to the promises of Scripture. That’s what we see in Scripture isn’t it? Star gazing, angels, inspired dreams and prophecies. We need to enter this Advent season in an attitude of prayer and with all our senses wide open—not to the blinking lights and garish ads of the world, but to God who has chosen to come to us as a baby in a manger. Lord Jesus, help us open our hearts to You, for if we miss You, we’ve missed it all.

3

A second place we need to prepare to receive this extremely important person into our world. We need to do all we can possibly do to prepare others to receive Him. John 1:10-12 say it clearly: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—.”

Do you hear and feel the tragedy and the irony in these verses? Jesus participated in the creation of the world. John 1:3 says, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” He made the world and then came to live in the world that He had made, among the people He had made, and the vast majority of them couldn’t have cared less. Even among those who saw and heard Him, many received Him not. Ultimately they rejected Him and conspired in His murder.

It seems to me that we need to feel the weight of that and we need to understand that it is happening over and over again. Much of the world’s population will not be celebrating Christmas at all, and among those who are, many will be celebrating a totally secular and materialistic version of Christmas and ignoring the living Christ altogether. In fact, there are many who simply use the Christmas holiday as an excuse for gluttony, to get drunk, to engage in immoral behavior and to be unimaginably selfish. In other words, the Lord is calling to them, but they aren’t listening.

Our “job one” in response to this is to pray intercessory prayers. We need to be on our knees interceding for a lost and dying world. In our Scripture lesson from Isaiah 60, verse two says, See, “darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.” Is this true or what? Our world is broken and coming apart at the seams. From Washington to Wall Street, from the streets of Cairo to the caves of Afghanistan, from the Sudan to Iran, from State College to Hollywood, life on planet earth is unraveling and no one seems to know how to fix it.

We need to understand that the keys to the kingdom are in our knees. We have it in our power to pray down blessing and healing and salvation upon the people of this world, and we need to put it into practice. And then, added to our prayers, we need to preach the gospel. It is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi to have

said, "Preach the gospel at all times -- If necessary, use words." We need to pray for people everywhere, and to show and teach them Jesus Christ. There's no better time to do this than now during this Advent season.

We need to prepare to receive Jesus into our innermost beings and to welcome Him into our world. Then, thirdly, we need to prepare to receive and to help others receive Jesus into the future.

I love the gist of Isaiah 60:1-5, it's not all darkness and gloom, not at all. Verse 1 says, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you." The end of verse 2 says, "the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you." Verses 3-5 say, "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come."

To prepare for His coming into the future, we need to position ourselves today for Isaiah's vision to be fulfilled among us. The vision is clear; God's people are meant to shine. Although Isaiah's vision stands, in the first place, as a promise to Jerusalem and speaks of a restored Israel, it is clear that the New Testament picks up on this same imagery in reference to those who receive Christ. Isaiah says, "for your light has come and his glory appears over you." John 1:4-5 say of Jesus, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." John 1:9 says, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." In John 9:5 Jesus says, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Then watch this: In Matthew 5:14 Jesus says to His disciples: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden."

I point out these connections because I don't want you to think I'm stretching a point beyond its proper boundaries. Jesus picks up on the same imagery of Isaiah 60 to speak of Himself, His ministry, and to speak of the mission He leaves to His

followers in the future. Isaiah was prophesying beyond what he knew or could imagine. He could not imagine, for example, that when he said "that to you the riches of the nations will come," that wise men, who had seen the Lord's star in the east, would come lay their treasures at the feet of the Christ child.

I want us to realize this morning that this is the Lord's plan for redeeming the world and it has never changed, and will not change until all is fulfilled. The only question is will we allow ourselves and position ourselves to share in the fulfillment of the vision? Will we allow His light to shine on us until we are aglow with His presence? Will we allow the purity of His light to burn away our selfishness, pride, fear, lust and every other vestige of the darkness within us? Will we see one another through His eyes and love one another that all men will know we are His disciples?

Beloved, please understand: we are meant to shine with the purity and love of Jesus; His glory is meant to be seen in us and among us. Our church is meant to shine. Isaiah 60:1 says, "Arise and shine for your light has come; the glory of the Lord rises upon you." To prepare ourselves to celebrate and to receive the coming of the Lord we need to rise to meet Him. We need to turn our faces away from whatever mirrors we or the world are holding before us and look instead into the loving eyes of our Savior. Calling upon the power of the Holy Spirit, we can love one another in our marriages, we can love our children, we can love one another here in the family of God and we can allow His love to overflow into ministries that will bless our neighbors and our world.

In these days of Advent, let us prepare Him room in our heart of hearts, let us pray for the world and show and share the Lord with all who will listen. And, let us embrace and commit ourselves to live into the vision of Isaiah 60, that through receiving the light of Christ, we will be His light for all the world to see.

The Fourth Street Church of God 4thstcog.com

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for November 27, 2011

Preparations for His Coming

Isaiah 60:1-5; John 1:1-14

Jon R. Neely, Pastor