

Expecting the Birth of the Christ Child

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.”

I am expecting! Soon I will experience the birth of a baby boy! Obviously I am not pregnant. But. Then again. I have been pregnant with the expectation of the birth of my grandson sometime between now and Epiphany Day.

That was the first thing that came to me when I read today’s Gospel from Luke. But then, I remembered the sculpture of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth that stands in front of the Church of the Visitation in Ein Karem, Israel. The two pregnant women greet each other with joy...and...expectation.

I realized that, in a spiritual sense, I am pregnant—pregnant with the expectation of another birth: The birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I venture to say that you are too.

The last four weeks—the last month of pregnancy is the most expectant and joy filled time for family and friends. It’s a “hold your breath” time that is filled with preparations to greet the newborn. We are in that expectant preparation time for the birth of our Lord.

We sing both solemn and deeply prayerful and yet wildly and joyful songs that tell of our preparations. The song “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” gives the impression that it is Christmas every day during this season. But really Christmas is only one day.

The four weeks leading up to Christmas Day, which we call Advent, is that most joyous time. It’s all about the expectation of what is coming and the joys of preparing for that most wonderful day.

That’s what we do when we are expecting. We prepare. When we prepare for any event in our lives, there are these components: Our minds, our physical bodies, our hearts, and our surroundings. Some of this preparation is done as individuals, some as families, and some as communities.

Of course, the “what and how” of the preparation depends on what is expected.

In Advent, as I mentioned earlier, we are preparing for the birth of Christ. How are we preparing? Do we even know how to prepare?!

Our scripture readings for the past 4 Sundays have given us clues, but I wonder if we heard;

and if we heard, are we following the advice given?

Some of you may know of a Christmas story that was written by Charles Tazewell and published in 1946. It is called The Littlest Angel. It is a story that I have read every year out loud to my son and daughter since they were toddlers. I have never ever gotten through the whole story without choking up; tears running down my cheeks. And I might even do that now as I tell you about it.

The story is about a little boy angel who is having trouble adjusting to heaven. One day there is a flutter of the angelic expectation and he finds out that they are preparing for the birth of the Christ child on Earth. They have all kinds of fancy gifts. He is distraught because he can't think of anything worthy. Finally, he comes up with an idea. He stands expectantly in the line of all the angels as God surveys the array of gifts. Then, just as God is approaching his gift, he suddenly thinks it is wrong and not worthy. Yet, of all the fancy gifts and all the grand preparation, his gift is deemed most worthy. Why was his gift most worthy? For those of you who have never heard the story, I will tell you at the end of the sermon.

But first, let's go back and review the clues for preparation we have read from the Gospel of Luke over the past 4 Sundays.

Advent 1: *We are told to stay alert; constantly praying and not letting our hearts get weighed down with the worries of life.*

Luke 21:35-36:

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life... Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength...”

This is very important in our prep work. How will we know to come to the birth if we are so busy with our parties and shopping and decorating that we miss the invitation to the real party?

And what if we are worrying about how to afford all the glitter and gifts that we think are important?! What if we are so focused on the material that we forget what we are preparing for?

This is a time when we can so easily become “drunk” with the lure of the world's celebration of the material that we put our faith and worship in the background.

Advent 2: *We are told to repent and turn back to God when we get distracted by the cares of this life.*

Luke 3:1-6:

“John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah...”

Preparing for distractions during this joyous time is also important. Being human, unexpected things will happen in day-to-day life which make it hard to keep focus and so we can get turned aside.

God gets that.

That is why we can take comfort that God is still with us and will help us through those tough times. Sometimes the tough times are really too hard for us to handle alone. If you need help call on a family member, a trusted friend, or Fr. Rob, or me.

God does not want you to keep it to yourself. God puts these people in your life for a reason. When you are having trouble—that is a great time to call on them. And prayer is your lifeline to faith and hope.

We must not let discouragement cause us to get groggy in our faith. Staying close to our faith community will help us through even the toughest times. Friends, family, pastors and the church community all have their place in helping us to keep from getting bogged down.

There is no shame before God. Being able to ask for help is a gift from God. Your practice of prayer is grounding yourself in your faith.

Advent 3: *We are to live in community with one another; sharing what we have no matter how small.*

Luke 3:7-18:

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise... Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you... Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Sharing is also important during this time of preparation. This is where gift giving comes in—but not the kind of gift giving the world tries to lure you to. You may think you have very little to share. When we think of sharing we think in terms of material items or money.

One of the greatest ways we can share is giving our time and our expertise in something—a talent or special education.

Let us not hide these under the proverbial bushel basket or only use them when you can make a profit. I know all of you can think of ways to use your talent and expertise but if you need help finding someone who is in need, talk to Fr. Rob or me or even a Vestry member.

When we share what we have we are definitely preparing for the birth of Christ! Because.... That is what his reign will be all about.

Advent 4: We are to give thanks to God for all that we have.

Luke 1:46-55:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...”

Ah. The Song of Mary. To be grateful for each day by giving thanks to God prepares us for a life of grateful living in Christ’s Kingdom. We are to expect that how we prepare for Christ’s birth **will** be noticed by God.

Buying the best most expensive decorations and having the nicest tree on the lot may be satisfying and make us feel good but God is not impressed by such material things. Though decorations can be a sign of worshipful and grateful hearts, much of what the world does to prepare for Christmas has little to do with preparing for the birth of Christ. Preparing our minds, our bodies, and our hearts is what is needed to welcome the Christ child.

Let us not neglect our personal prayer time or our corporate prayer time. Let us not neglect the gathering of ourselves together to worship and give thanks for all that we have, all that we will always have and most especially for the greatest gift to us: Jesus Christ our Savior.

Surrounding ourselves with our faith community in worship and in sharing the bounty of God’s creation keeps the joy in our expectation of the birth of our true King.

With that kind of preparation, the most pleasing gift we will have for Christ Jesus will be like the last line of hymn 112 *“In the Bleak Mid-Winter”*: “...yet what can I give him—give my heart.”

This is what the Littlest Angel gave—not just an old wooden box of little boy treasures.