

What do you think the following list of things has in common?

food, meals... playing a sport or game... taking a test in school... home renovation...
hosting guests... retirement... end of life... emergency situations... an interview...
marriage... having a child... life transitions... public speaking... celebrating birthdays,
anniversaries, or holidays...

Any ideas? They all require a level of preparedness or preparation. Preparation is defined as the activity or process of making something ready or of becoming ready for something.

It is a fact that we make many preparations for different events in our everyday lives. Even for the things we pray to God we never have to experience like a tornado or hurricane or lockdown. In some things we go to great lengths to be prepared, perhaps overly prepared, especially if we are type A extreme “J” on the Meyers Briggs. We have preparations for our process of preparing.

But preparing for different events in our everyday lives is not really what we are being asked to think about today or in the season of Advent. In Advent, we are invited to, more importantly, dig deeper into our hearts and prepare the way for the greatest gift of all- the miraculous birth of God incarnate, God with us, coming to us out of love. In the past we have been invited to prepare the way by setting time aside from our already slammed calendars of holiday cheer or retreat from the hustle and bustle and find time to be. We may indeed need both of those, or at least might appreciate the thought of them, but I want to invite us to prepare for Christmas and the coming light of Christ differently this year.

Advent is a season in the church liturgical year that focuses on the good news that comes in the midst of darkness (disorientation, confusion, hurt, trouble). This is the foundation to the encouragement for us all to **Experience a Sacred Christmas**.

It's no accident we light candles during the season of Advent. As we journey toward Christmas, the nights get longer, the sun gets weaker, the days get colder- all leading toward the winter solstice, December 21st, the longest night of the year. We all need all the warmth and light we can get. Therefore, we light candles to remind ourselves that God is with us even in the deepest darkness, able and willing to interrupt darkness with gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. (Betsy Swetenberg, JP, Advent 2022, 11)

Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on the good news that “new life starts in the dark.” “Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.” We, in a myriad of ways, know darkness all too well, don’t we? Maybe you have for quite some time. Darkness can be our sins and that in which we revel and quarrel. Darkness is also circumstances that overwhelm us with grief and loss. Advent can be a very difficult season for those of us who have lost a loved one during this season or are reminded of our loved ones who have passed because we can remember them participating in our holiday traditions. It may be an understatement then that we all know we need all the warmth and light we can get.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, calls them to “**lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light: let us live honorably as in the day, not in sin and darkness. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ...**” Putting on the Lord Jesus transforms and renews us- delivering us from darkness to light.

So then, what if? What if we take this season of Advent, the rest of this year even if that is what it takes, to dig deeper into our hearts and experience a sacred Christmas by preparing ourselves to see differently? What I mean by this is what if we stretch our imaginations and dare to dream that a new thing is possible?

With God, in Jesus Christ, a new thing is possible. Yes, in our everyday lives’ things can get better, but let’s not stop there. This Advent let’s get to the heart of what really matters. Let’s get to the heart of what is really at stake for us as we prepare for the good news of God to interrupt our lives with hope, peace, joy, love, and light. The portrait of God’s Kingdom is unlike any other.

A new heaven and a new earth, no more weeping or cries of distress, no infant mortality or premature death, no war or invasion or brutality- people build houses and get to live in them, people plant crops and get to eat their fruit, children are not born in poverty or calamity, the wolf and the lamb feed together, no one hurts or destroys anymore. (Betsy Swetenberg, JP, Advent 2022, 11)

This is what this season of Advent is all about! This is what we, as God’s beloved children, are preparing our hearts for. The prophet Isaiah declares, “**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.**” Generation after generation in the scriptures people waited for some light, some sign that God was still with them, that the world could become something new. It was the Israelites most ardent prayer. And as we have the benefit of reading ahead in the gospel story, they found their long-suffering hopes and dreams fulfilled on that holy night in that little town of Bethlehem.

Experiencing a Sacred Christmas redirects our imaginations and dreams and puts them in line with the Star shining light on Jesus, the newborn King, Prince of Peace, light of the world- a light in the sky shining down and a light within us shining through.

Shifting gears just slightly, I want to take a moment to express the difference between preparing and planning. I know I can get the two mixed up and marry them together sometimes. The difference is based on the premise that we don't plan the future, because much of what happens to us is beyond our control. What we can do though is prepare to deal with it when it rolls in.

If you go to the beach when the wind is up, you see surfers catching the waves. Folks who truly love to surf basically do everything else in life that they have to do, just so they can get back to the water. Surfers don't *plan* waves; they *prepare* to ride them when they roll in.

In our relationship and trust in God, our focus is to be on prayer and preparation more than prediction and planning. This is true of personal life, being church, or in reference to the Second Coming of Jesus.

Amos 4:12 states "Prepare to meet your God". This verse was addressed to the people of Israel, but it is meant for us as well. Meeting God requires a preparation. According to the Strong Bible definition, the word "Prepare" means "*to be firm, be stable, be established, to be set up, to be ready, to make arrangements.*"

One author writes, "We have to keep in mind that everything that we are busy preparing here on earth will vanish (Matthew 6:19) but preparing yourself to face God will remain eternal (Matthew 6:20). We cannot escape this meeting with God. We may run away from many appointments here on earth but encountering God one day is inevitable. We all have to face God, whether we are believers or not, rich or poor and prepared or not. It is wise to get prepared for that day.

It's been said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans."

Throughout the Bible we see God's desire for people to pray and prepare for the Lord's intervention. Proverbs 19:21 teaches, "**The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.**" This is a crucially important truth for us to understand. What this verse says is that we should spend more time seeking to discern the purpose of the Lord for our life and for our congregational life, than we should be devising plans about what we think God wants us to do. In our own lives we want to do everything we can to discover God's purpose for our lives. We want to be praying and preparing for God's intervention and action so we're ready to ride the wave of what God is doing in the world and in our life.

In Genesis 12, God told Abram to begin a journey without telling him where he was going. Abram couldn't plan the itinerary, all he could do was prepare by telling his family, wrapping up business details, packing his tent, and setting out. The Israelites exodus from Egypt is a story of prayer and preparation. God planned an exodus no person could. No one would have written the story God did. Moses didn't even get to see the whole plan ahead of time. David, a shepherd boy turned warrior and king, didn't know what God's plans were for him from the beginning. David did his part to prepare for each step along the way. And John the Baptist declared, **"Prepare the way of the Lord."** He didn't say, "Plan the way of the Lord."

The biblical truth is God does the planning and we do the preparing. God is the one who says, **"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart."** (Jeremiah 29:11-13) Notice that God doesn't say, "Let me know when you come up with plans for your future that you want me to bless."

As we experience a sacred Christmas this year, how are we being called to see differently, imagine more openly, or dream more faithfully? Our faith is not to be one more item on a "to do" list. Our faith is to be what forms our "to be and to do" list.

Over the next several weeks, we are all invited to experience a sacred Christmas by preparing, encountering, remembering, praising, and celebrating. Our invitation to this season of Advent is not to wait passively upon the day in which the world turned, but actively in prayer and preparation for when the world turns again.

Let all God's people say... Amen.