

Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

Second Sunday of Advent
Midway Presbyterian Church
December 10, 2023

Getting Ready for Christmas

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, we hear it declared that Israel has “served her term” of bondage to sin and a new era is about to begin. God will subdue those who seek to thwart the people and tenderly care for the needs of the flock. Listen to these words from Isaiah 40:1-11...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today, John the Baptist comes to prepare all hearts for the advent of the Messiah. John’s was the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He baptized with water. The coming One would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Listen to these words from Mark 1:1-8...

Sermon

In the opening verse of that wonderful hymn of Isaac Watts, “Joy to the World,” we find these words:

Joy to the world! The Lord is come.
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room...

In our Gospel Lesson we hear John the Baptist call us to prepare ourselves to celebrate the coming of the Messiah. In this Second Week of Advent, I would like for us to consider several things that can help make this Christmas a new beginning, a real joy and blessing, not only for us, but for those around us.

First, we can hear the music. Music is associated with some of the most joyful experiences of life for many people. When I go to a Clemson football game (which nowadays is

not very often), I enjoy the music of the band almost as much as the game itself. There's the fun of watching and hearing the band marching to the stadium. There's the pre-game show and the band playing while the Tigers run down the hill. There's the half-time performance. And I especially enjoy the tradition observed at the end of the third quarter, when they play the familiar "Sock-It-to-'em." Watching a game on television, you hear very little, if any, of the band. But you do hear plenty of advertisements for cars, drinks, and insurance—especially that Allstate guy who causes mayhem to one and all.

If your personal pilgrimage through Advent is like mine, then music plays a big part in your celebration of the season. We are so blessed to have Beth, Roz and our choir! When the choir practices, there's a special joy in hearing the hymns and songs of Christmas. If I hear on the radio a song like "What Child Is This?" I start getting the Christmas spirit in the best sense of the word. In 1971 I was serving my first church after seminary in Pontotoc, Mississippi, when Hazel and I went to a Christmas program at the First Presbyterian Church of Oxford, Mississippi. A girl we knew played "O Holy Night" on the violin. That's been 52 years ago, and while I can't remember anything else about the service, I can still remember that beautiful hymn.

The music of Advent lifts the heart and inspires the imagination. What creates a greater spirit of adoration, wonder, and praise than the powerful grandeur of Handel's "Messiah," or the beautiful "Ave Maria," or the solemn "Silent Night"?

Music has a message all its own, and the message of the music of Advent and Christmas directs our thoughts to the one eternal God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to be our Savior and Lord. Listen to the sacred music, and it will help you get ready for Christmas.

Secondly, listen to the voices of Advent. What are some of the voices of this season? In the stores you hear the exchange between salespeople and customers. In homes you hear, “What do you want for Christmas?” And on television, radio, and the internet there are urgings of advertisers to buy that special gift from a particular store—they’re on sale now, but they won’t last long.

In church you hear the voice of the preacher proclaiming “good news of great joy.” In our Lesson today from the Gospel of Mark we can hear the voice of John the Baptist calling for us to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. We’re “to make straight paths for him.” That is, we’re to give up selfish ways of living, renounce sin, and seek God’s forgiveness. We’re to live in a relationship with Almighty God, a life of faithfulness and obedience. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Of course, there are other voices that speak from scripture. Prophets. Angels. Shepherds. Wisemen. Mary. Elizabeth. Zechariah. Simeon. From the pages of sacred scripture, men and women of faith herald the God of steadfast love who does not forget his people. Because he so loves them, he gives his only begotten Son, to be our Savior and take away our sin. And so the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth.

And mingled with the memory of the first Advent are hopes for a second Advent—a second coming of Christ. “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Mt. 24:42) On Christmas Eve when we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we do so “until he comes again.” Every Sunday, we pray as Jesus taught us, “Thy kingdom come.” More than any other, it is the voice of Christ that we need to hear and heed. The voice of Christ inviting all who labor and are heavy laden, to come to him and find rest.

Music, voices. Thirdly, we need to beware of another voice this season. And that is the voice of temptation. “Take heed, watch and pray, for you know not when the time is.” (Mk. 13:33) For this is a time when we are tempted to indulge in too much eating and drinking. Tempted to go beyond our means in spending. Instead of Advent being a period in which we prepare room in our hearts for Christ to be born anew, it can degenerate into weeks of self-indulgence, excessive buying, and schedules that permit no room for Jesus, his Word, his Spirit.

What can we do, you and I, to hold at bay the siren sounds of temptation. Intentional living can overcome many Christmas seductions. Decisions made in advance about what to eat and drink, what parties and activities to attend. Planning ahead of time about what part of the budget will be spent for toys, clothes, and so forth. Will there be some division of labor, or will the work all fall on one person?

Music, voices, overcoming temptation. And fourth in our list to help us get ready for Christmas is this: observe some meaningful traditions. The great theological ethicist Richard Niebuhr said that “where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community, and where community is to be formed, common memory must be created.”

I think of that marvelous musical, “Fiddler on the Roof.” In the opening song, “Tradition,” Tevye (TĚV ee uh) says:

You may ask, “Why do we stay up there (in Anatevka) if it is so dangerous?” I’ll tell you: Anatevka is our home. And you may ask, “How do we keep our balance?” I can tell you in one word—Tradition! Because of our traditions everyone of us knows who he is and what God expects us to do. Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky—as a Fiddler on the Roof!

What are some of the traditions that make Christmas special for you? Decorating the tree, arranging the manger scene, a special Advent Service (ten of us attended the Advent

Service and lunch at Lickville this past Thursday and found it to be a blessing to all), the Christmas parade, a candlelight communion service, the Christmas Joy Offering, taking gifts to children at Thornwell Home, or Seniors at the Presbyterian Home in Clinton.

When our children were young, we had a family tradition of going out into the woods (usually belonging to a church member!) and cutting down a cedar tree, followed by hot chocolate that we had brought along with our bow saw. Traditions can bring us comfort and joy as they create a common memory.

Music, voices, overcoming temptation, traditions. A fifth thing that can make Christmas a blessing is providing some time for silence and meditation, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:7) Advent is also a time for being still. Remember Mary and Martha, the two sisters visited by Jesus in Luke 10? Martha was anxious about many things, while Mary sat and listened to him. Are we so busy that we aren’t taking time to listen to him? Our stormy, hectic, battered souls need peace and quiet—healing which can come when the body and mind are at rest. In Psalm 46 we read,

“Be still, and know that I am God.” (v10a)

And Isaiah the prophet:

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.” (30:15)

Advent is a season for being silent so that we may hear what God is saying to us, and thereby learn to listen throughout the year. For God is a personal God who cares, who hears our prayers, and who answers them. God has time for us and we need to find time to be with God, to be open to God’s word, God’s peace. Read once more the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea. Ponder in the silence of your soul, the wonder of this event. Give to God

your heart in gratitude and commitment. Offer to him your prayers and praise. Find some time for meditation and devotion.

Finally, we need to be sensitive to the needs of others during this season. The bells of the Salvation Army volunteers remind us that Christmas is not just about receiving; it's also about giving. The list of needs is very long, and we can't address them all. But we can address some of them. Through our annual Joy Offering, we touch current and past church workers in need. Kind of like our Quiet Fund. Our Jar Offering supports women recovering from addiction and homelessness. There's the whispered plea of the lonely, the frail, the heavy laden. Is there someone who is sick or depressed this season, someone that you could brighten by a simple expression of care? A phone call, a card, a visit? To celebrate Christmas is to reflect some measure of that care and compassion of Christ our Lord.

Yes, Christmas is coming, so let's get ready. By hearing the sacred music; by listening to the voices of scripture, especially the voice of Christ; by being aware of temptations; by observing some meaningful traditions; by providing some time for silence and meditation; and by hearing the sounds of need, knowing and sharing Christ's spirit of care and compassion.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come.
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room.

And heaven and nature sing.
And heaven and nature sing.

Amen.