

Second Sunday in Advent
December 14, 2014
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Advent Action

Good morning. I'm planning to keep the homily fairly short this morning, because we have a lot of stuff going on here today. There's another service at 9:00, of course, and at 10:00, there's an intergenerational education program on world hunger. At noon, right after the third service, we're holding a town hall meeting on next year's plans and budget. So we need to keep on schedule.

And that's a contrarian idea for Advent. We think of this season as a quiet time: a period of contemplation, reflection, penitence, and prayer. We emphasize stillness, calm, and silent thought. This is theologically sound, but I think for some of us it's also a welcome respite from the frenzy of the secular "holiday season" that seems to have abducted Advent. THAT litany starts well before Thanksgiving these days and hits us from all directions: start early, decorate, mail packages, send cards, entertain, cook, bake, eat, drink, drink some more, be merry, party, drive, fly, travel, and—of course—buy, buy, buy, shop till you drop, spend big, spend more, give your spouse a new car topped with a big red bow, give your kids the latest electronics, buy stuff for everyone, but hey, you deserve a nice treat for yourself while you're online or at the mall, only 10 more shopping days until Xmas, max out the credit cards, don't fret about the debt, worry next year about how to pay the bills. Whew! I'm exhausted, and I really haven't done much of that stuff. No wonder the stillness of Advent sounds so good.

But this Sunday isn't so much about serenity and quiet contemplation. We've reached the third Sunday of Advent, or Gaudete Sunday, which means "rejoice." On this day, the somber, penitential nature of our Advent observance eases a little as we acknowledge and rejoice in the nearness of the birth of Jesus. We symbolize this break by lighting a rose pink candle rather than blue; some churches even have rose-colored vestments for the clergy to wear on this Sunday. Just as Gaudete Sunday has a different liturgical color, it also has a different emphasis: a bias toward action, a stress on preparation for the Lord's coming that pulls us from thinking to doing. Sometimes you may hear today referred to as "stir up Sunday" because of the opening words of today's Collect: "Stir up your power, O Lord." And "stir up" is what today's Scripture readings seem to be doing to us. Each calls for us to be active, to be doing. But what a contrast this action—this Advent preparation—poses to the frantic busy-ness of the secular celebration.

John tells us he has come to "make straight the way of the Lord," echoing the passage from Isaiah that we heard last week. Today's verses from Isaiah list all the things that God has sent the prophet to do, preparations for the coming of God's kingdom: the prophet has been sent to bring good news, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, to comfort and provide for all who mourn. "I will greatly rejoice (There's our word of the day again) in the Lord," says Isaiah.

And Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, describes in detail the things they—and we—should be doing or, in some cases, not doing: rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances; do not quench the Spirit; do not despise the words of the prophets; test everything; hold fast to the good; abstain from every evil.

And how exactly should we do these things? What might they look like in our own Advent time this year, in our own lives and world and circumstances? Some of these actions that we're called to do sound a little vague to me. But in setting up my Advent devotions this year, I came across a simple tool that has helped me think about this subject. If you'd heard me preach before, you probably know that calendars always seems to come up in my sermons, and you may be getting tired of it—but I'm going to do it again anyway. I've seen a huge range of Advent calendars—there's a hilarious list of them on the Rev. Tim Schenk's Clergy Confidential blog—and I'm actually using three myself this year. But my favorite is this single sheet of paper, printed off a blog. What do I like about it? For each day, it suggests an active way to approach Advent, to advance the coming of God's kingdom in ways that I see as more concrete expressions of the ideas in Isaiah and Thessalonians: show love; give; watch; play; think; sing; contact someone; do something new; pray; forgive; welcome; say yes; learn; remember. Those sound easy, don't they? Doable? In fact, we can all do some of those things today. Greet an unfamiliar face at coffee hour. Thank one of the people whose work made this service possible. Listen for God's voice, calling you to some new mission. Sing out your favorite seasonal hymn or learn a new one. Didn't have time to grab a tag from the Angel tree? You can still donate to Christmas meals. Come to the World Awareness Dinner at 10:00, and learn new insights about global hunger. Didn't RVSP? Come anyway and watch. Come back for the town hall meeting at noon and help the Vestry and other parish leaders prayerfully consider our plans for next year.

Most of all, rejoice! Join with Isaiah and St. Paul and Mary and rejoice! The day of the Lord is near, and God's Kingdom is drawing closer. Stir up your faith. Put action into Advent, to make straight the way of the Lord. Amen.