

“For What or For Whom Are We Preparing?”

Romans 13:11–14; Matthew 24:36–44

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We tend to think of Advent as a season to make preparations, and we do indeed make many preparations at home and church. In our home, the normal rituals begin this weekend, and in a normal year, there is a long list of things we *must* get done from getting the tree up and the decorations in place all the way to cleaning the house and straightening up the yard. This year *we* have a little grace, not only because Ian and Ali have long since grown up and moved away, but also because Dana has just had knee surgery. Yet the preparations will be made.

We have many traditional practices of preparation in the church as well from the greens that will be placed at HOG — or as Warren has renamed it, “the Hangin’”— to special rituals of worship and community service. As in our homes, there are traditional times and ways we do things, with some flexibility, of course, which has had to become quite a bit of flexibility during Covid. But we prepare our buildings and lives.

Yet for what or for whom are we preparing? We know it’s not just for Christmas morning and the arrival of Santa, in addition to family members with whom we will celebrate, though we need to make these preparations. Our first thought may be that it is the baby Jesus for whom we prepare, and this is not a bad answer, but he has already been born. We don’t have to get him into the world every year, as it sometimes seems. We remember the story and reflect on its meaning.

That requires some preparation, but we have more to prepare for because in the church we speak of two Advents of Jesus — the birth in a Bethlehem stable, and the Second Coming at the great consummation of salvation history. The problem is Jesus says in our reading from Matthew that there is no way to prepare for the latter because even he doesn’t know when it will happen. All we can do is remain alert. Furthermore, we don’t really believe in a literal Second Coming, at least most of us don’t, and those who do don’t live like we believe in one.

It is difficult to know how literally we should read apocalyptic literature. Biblical scholars like Marcus Borg and Bart Ehrman disagree as to whether the historical Jesus had a literal apocalyptic view. He may have been speaking in images and metaphors about a great mystery.

So, where does this leave us in our preparations? We remember a birth in Bethlehem and all that it means — incarnation, God dwelling with us, the beginning of a much larger story. And we speak of a Second Coming, but somewhat halfheartedly because we're not sure we believe in it, and even if we do, it's not clear what we should do.

But perhaps there is another possibility — the Second Coming has already happened, or to be more precise, is in the process of happening. God enters this world not just in a Bethlehem stable but in our hearts and lives. The God who was in Christ comes again and again through acts of love and kindness, through the very people we seek to serve, through mountaintop experiences and ordinary moments. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is with us now, moving and working among us and through us. Our challenge is simply to recognize this reality.

I have shared with some of you before these words from Annie Dillard's Pulitzer Prize winning book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

The Mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his insouciant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there. (p. 10)

Perhaps the coming of Christ works like this. Christ comes into our world whether we realize it or not. Our calling is to prepare for this.

So, how do we do it? In the reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul, who believes the world as we know it is coming to an end in his lifetime or soon thereafter, suggests that we live a certain kind of life. He speaks of laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light. More specifically, he says we should live honorably, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy, but putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is speaking of specific concerns for his time, which may or may not be at the top of the list for our time. When we were in Williamsburg, Virginia, a few weeks ago, Dana and I went to Revel at Chowling's Tavern. I hope that didn't put us on the bad list! It was a very tame Revel with historical interpreters, music, dancing, and games.

But the basic message here is that if we anticipate the coming of Christ into our world, one way we prepare is by living as God would have us to live — not wasting energy on diversions and escapism but investing in things that matter, not fussing and feuding with one another but loving each other and God, not falling asleep to the possibility of the sacred but waking up to holiness by immersing ourselves in good and noble things.

I have shared with some of you a story about a family in another setting. One of the children told his mother he wanted to be baptized. She told him this was a serious undertaking, he would be asking Jesus into his heart, and this meant living in a better way, for example not fighting with his brother. He said he was ready for this, we talked, and then I baptized him. A few weeks later, his mother caught him hitting his brother. With indignation, she confronted him, saying, "I thought you asked Jesus into your heart?" "Oh," he said, "I told him to get out."

It doesn't work that way. When Christ comes to dwell with us, it is for good, and we are called to live appropriately, not perfectly, but with a view toward what would make our Lord feel at home. That's all Paul is talking about. Living in a way enables us to welcome Christ.

Another way we prepare is by enhancing our attentiveness, developing our capacity to look and listen for Christ's work among us. In his book *Prayers*, the French Abbe Michel Quoist says that if we

knew how to listen to God, we would hear God speaking to us through all of life; if we knew how to look at life through God's eyes, we would see it as innumerable tokens of the love of the Creator seeking the love of God's creatures (pp. 1, 17). He then goes on to offer brief reflections on how God is present in a friend, a baby, and many other parts of creation. The key lies in learning how to see and listen.

Some expressions of the Divine are obvious. For example, in the wonder of Toy Joy, in the gift of sacred music during Hanging of the Greens, in the laughter of children or the kindness of a friend, we cannot help but sense the Holy. But some sacred realities take more spiritual discernment. It's like the 3-D images which at first appear ordinary, but when we learn to relax our vision and shift our focus, an object seems to move toward us. How do we do that in the spiritual realm?

It is partly by training the eyes and ears of our souls. We do that through what we are doing right now, worshipping together in this majestic space, offering prayers of confession, hearing texts of faith, lifting up hymns of praise. We search for God here because so many things about this time and place open us to the possibility of the Divine, but in the process, we are also training the eyes and ears of our souls to look and listen for God at other times and places.

But we also train our eyes and ears through private times of devotion, various habits of spiritual discernment like journaling or walking the labyrinth. There are many practices that can help us prepare. And a part of the challenge lies not just in working harder but in learning to trust in God. As with viewing 3-D images, at times we need to relax our spiritual vision, simply trust that God is with us, all around us, among us, because in truth, God is.

So, we prepare for the coming of Christ by living in a way worthy of Christ's presence and enhancing our attentiveness to the Divine. Then, we leave room for wonder, something other than what we might expect. God's first coming into this world took people by surprise, even though there were hints in scripture that it might happen this way. But it was just too scandalous to think that the Maker of the Universe would become a fragile child with a messy diaper in a dirty animal shed.

It still scandalizes people. I received a form letter this week from a man in our community asking that I help correct a heresy the church has taught for 2,000 years — that the Savior of the World was born in a common animal shed. That couldn't be, he argued, God would not allow it, the faithful would not accept it.

Well, the faithful have struggled with it and all that it implies to this day, the very idea that God would become so vulnerable, rub shoulders with commoners, inhabit the messiness of this world. It is a scandal, but one that lies at the heart of our faith. The first coming of the Christ took everyone by surprise. Why would we think Christ's coming into our world would be in a way we expect?

We tend to think that spiritual renewal is about returning to experiences we have had before; if not recreating them, at least trying to relive them in our minds. And there is value in the familiar, but there are limits too, not the least of which is missing the new thing God might say or do. In what new ways might God be moving among us today?

Perhaps in some new spiritual practice or service opportunity... Perhaps in a willingness to let something go... Perhaps in a new venture or partnership for the church... Perhaps not only in an army veteran's courageous intervention in a night club shooting that saved lives but in the equally courageous willingness to speak about love for all people... Some might find the latter possibility scandalous. In the context of the biblical story, that would argue for its authenticity.

To suggest that the Second Coming is already happening is not to deny the possibility of a great day of consummation for God's work in Christ. It has not happened for 2,000 years, but who knows about the future, and what is time from God's perspective? It is simply to recognize the ways Christ is already at work in this world. I think of the scene in Acts 1 where the disciples are gazing into the heavens where the Risen Christ has ascended, and suddenly two angelic figures appear, saying, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" They go on to say that he will return the same way, but their calling is not to gaze up in wonder; it is to be Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Such is our calling.