

December 9 2018
Advent II
St Luke 3: 1 - 6

As I am sure most of us have heard many times over since we were children, the four week long season of Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas. Perhaps many of us, when we were quite young, eagerly opened each new window on our Advent calendar, counting down the number of days. Or, in our homes, just as in church, we had an advent wreath with four candles on our dining room table. Each Sunday, back in those wonderful days when families sat down together for a meal, we would light the appropriate number of candles, have a short reading, and a prayer before we ate.

We are constantly given reminders and nudges to prepare for Christmas. There are just X number of shopping days. At the post offices we see dates and deadlines for getting our cards and packages in the mail so that they will arrive in time. Deadlines to the right; deadlines to the left., and in the midst of it, countless news and magazine articles on how to have the perfectly prepared home for the holidays; how to prepare the perfect meal; how to prepare an extravaganza.

Before we know it, preparation for Christmas becomes competitive. There are formally sanctioned Christmas lighting contests, a bit of status seeking by talking about how much we are doing and how many events we are attending or how much we are spending. I even heard a fellow say that true American Christian patriots need to spend more this year so that we can improve the economy and protect our nation from coming in second place.

Even if we try to avoid all of the competitiveness, it is very easy to begin thinking of Christmas in terms of reciprocity. We look at our Christmas card list and see that someone hasn't sent us a card for four years. Maybe we should drop them instead of letting them know we are thinking of them. Uncle Clarence gave me a book that had the price still in the corner of the dust jacket; I'd better equal or better it this year. Oh dear, the McGilcutites invited us over for dinner last March; we'd better invite them to come to our home for a dinner sometime between Christmas and New Years.

To be blunt, that sort of thinking sucks the joy right out of Christmas. It becomes a chore that leaves us exhausted, and emotionally and spiritually empty. If it goes well, we can sit back in quiet pride that we lived up to everyone's standards. Even our own! If it doesn't go absolutely Martha Stewart perfectly, we emotionally beat ourselves up, and wonder why we even tried.

Is that the Christmas that we truly desire? Consumerism, competition, reciprocity, status? Is there true inner joy in all of that? Perhaps it is because we are so busy using our brain to calculate and think that we've forgotten to tap into our heart.

Children don't seem to have that problem, this time of the year, or any time, for that matter. It is their heart, not their brain, that rules. I think that is why Jesus made such a point of emphasizing to the grown-ups that if you don't approach the gates to the kingdom of heaven with the wide-eyed wonder and joy of this child sitting on my lap, you'll never make it.

Children give and receive from the heart. They constantly reach out in compassion for others, and often do it so indiscriminately. Perhaps that helps explain how, later in life, we often look back on

Christmas from years ago. Sometimes we understand and take to heart something that we missed at the time, and yet it changed our life.

I have a very special fondness for the Christmas song, "Little Drummer Boy." In the lower elementary Sunday school we had a gift exchange, and I received a bright neon yellow 45 RPM copy. To be honest, the song had nothing to do with the Christmas pageant of Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, angels, shepherds, and wise men. The Gospels don't mention drums or a drummer, and frankly, I'm not certain the boy and his instrument would have been all that welcome just after the birth of Jesus.

But it reminds us of something very important that children know and adults often forget - giving from the heart. The boy wanted to give something to show his love, but he was poor, and the only thing he had was his ability to tap on his drum. He gave it. And a half century ago, someone gave from the heart and gave me a gift.

It was only many years later than I learned that the giver of that record came from a home where there wasn't much money, but a tremendous amount of maternal love. That record came from a true servant's heart.

In Baruch in our first lesson for this morning, and then again in our Gospel Lesson, we read about returning home to God. It is figurative language, and I am very certain we should not take it literally because it has nothing to do with repairing and upgrading the infrastructure. Rather, it is a message of preparing to receive true joy in our life by coming home to Him, and in the company of others. That is what God is doing for us - as promised by the prophets, by John the Baptist, and then as so clearly shown in the words and teachings of Jesus.

The challenge you and I face is that we can be so busy doing things or seeking to be so perfect that we exceed the expectations of others, that we snuff out our opportunities for joy. For others, it is clinging to horrible experiences, nurturing them along from one year to the next.

Perhaps some of you remember the Cubs baseball announcer, Harry Carey. When he was working he was a delight to be around - laughing, fun, witty. But the moment the engineer signalled that his microphone was turned off, he turned off that vibrant personality. For him, Christmas was the worst day of the year because it brought back nothing but horrible memories of growing up in an orphanage. He wanted nothing to do with it, and nothing to do with people on that day.

Later in life he married Dutchie, and she knew all about his childhood, and that Harry was truly hurting. She couldn't make up for his childhood, but she was determined to give him unconditional love. At first it was hard to convince him to stay home on Christmas, but after a couple of years, like Scrooge from the beloved Christmas Carol, he warmed up to the holy day. In short order, it changed him, not just on Christmas, but throughout the year.

This past week, as we marked the passing of President Bush, we have been reminded of great world events that transpired during his term. The only story that caught my attention, and will probably stay with me for a very long time was how the Bush Family stayed in the White House over Christmas, rather than returning to their home, family, and friends in Texas. They did it for what might seem like an odd reason for the person considered the most powerful man in the world.

If they went to Texas it would mean that the Secret Service would have to leave their homes and family to accompany him. He didn't want them to have to do it, and wanted them to share Christmas with their families. The Bush's would return to Texas the next day.

For me, it is another example of a servant's heart, of making the road of life a little smoother for others, of be thoughtful of others, caring, and doing something loving.

In Baruch and in St Luke's passage for this morning where John the Baptist quotes Isaiah, the message is on what God is doing - preparing a good clear highway for people to come home to Him. In many ways, he is still doing that. But this time around, God has invited you and me to be part of that road crew that works on the infrastructure. Not of real roads or highways, of course, but on the spiritual and often very tangible ways of serving others so they can find their way to God's kingdom.

As these remaining days tick by with what seems like increasing speed, the question remains: For what are you preparing? Is it more inventory, honours and recognition? Or would you rather prepare for joy from giving of yourself and caring for others? For opening your heart so that others can give of themselves to you? Are you open to taking the risk of making your way home to God by approaching this most holy day with the wide-eyed delight and wonder of a child? Where is your heart? On whom or what is it focused?

I believe those are important and challenging questions for each one of us, because unless we face them and find the right answers, Christmas can be very empty for others, and for ourselves.