

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord.

Years ago a man was seen yawning during the homily. Afterward the priest asked him why he wasn't paying attention. The man replied, "because your sermon was not original." The priest was speechless. He knew the same topic came up every year, but he had searched for hours to present it in a new way. "I don't think that's true," he stammered. "At least I hope not." "Oh yes, father, I have a book at home, that contains every word you've preached." And, the next day the man brought the preacher a dictionary.

While I will not step outside of Webster's, this first Sunday in Advent is a bit unusual. Although there are four Sundays before Christmas, there are only three weeks this year to prepare. Those who are "of this world" will undoubtedly feel increased pressure. For Episcopalians who don't believe in putting up the tree or singing carols until Christmas, it means less waiting. This is our year.

For me the first Sunday in Advent is very special, and has been since I was a little boy. I was not raised Episcopalian where trees go up at the last minute, and Christmas carols after Thanksgiving are a guilty pleasure. Lights and music came early when I was six years old. My mother followed my father west thousands of miles from family and friends to a tiny community named Early Winters. Think early sunset and late sunrise. Things were dark in the winter, it was hard to reach the other three families in the snow, and there was no TV in our deep valley. Worse, my father worked long hours early in his U.S. Forest Service career.

Needing a diversion, the weeks leading up to Christmas were a time of great anticipation and preparation for my mom. Her lights and music started early, but decorations took many weeks. My little brother, Dan, and I had important roles to play. We spent hours quietly cutting out snowflakes with deadly sharp scissors now banned by convention but issued then with stern warnings. At 5 and 6 years old, we were told that a well-decorated house could be more easily seen from an airborne sleigh and that naughty and nice lists were updated each day. Hours went into the preparation during Advent.

Each night the Three Wisemen could get a little closer to the empty crèche, starting from the piano and working around the living room end tables toward the mantle. They wouldn't make it until Christmas Eve.

Church was also a big part of Christmas, especially Christmas Eve. We had to drive all the way to Winthrop and back on an icy dirt road in the dark. It was a long scary trip and there were no streetlights. In fact no lights of any kind except stars, which were bigger back then. But we made it. Every time. And, church was a place of food, music, dazzling lights, and Jesus.

As a result of that childhood I have a hard time waiting for Christmas, and my lights do come on early. Hopefully next-door neighbors don't mind too much. Since I am a "converted" Episcopalian and my wife is a cradle Episcopalian, we had to hammer out some compromises. I have gradually embraced Twelfth Night, which spills into January (twelve days of Christmas,

yeah!), and she has gradually embraced putting up the tree a bit early. Every family creates its own customs, and so it should be. God cares more about the spirit, not the timing.

The spirit and real key to Christmas is in the preparation. Not the tree or the lights or the packages. All of which are wonderful. But, the real preparation. The focusing in on why we have the holiday. Advent is about preparing mind and soul so that when Christmas comes we are in the spirit and ready.

Our three readings today help with that. Isaiah wrote today's lines after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, and then Judah. Jerusalem itself had been sacked. Isaiah had warned all along in specific detail that the sins of the people would be their undoing. They had not listened. In rejecting God they had walked away from his protection. And yet with all in ruins, the end of that reading still expresses of hope. Hope that despite sins, God will forgive us. That hope was, and will again in 22 days, be fulfilled with Christ's birth.

In the Epistle, Paul opened to the church in Corinth that because of the grace and forgiveness of God, they are now enriched and strengthened and lack no spiritual gifts. God is faithful beyond man and, despite their sins. They are now reconciled to God through the birth and life of Christ. At the end of the age they will be found blameless...not through their acts but through their faith. And that gift would not have happened without the birth of Jesus.

Finally in the Gospel Jesus himself is talking straight to all of us right now. Be ready, prepare. The end is coming when the sun will be darkened and the stars will begin to fall. Jesus does not know when this will happen; only the Father knows. But, he knows it will come and he is warning us to be on watch, to stay awake. To prepare.

Now, as a lifelong Boy Scout, from the age of 11 until I went into the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, I was taught the motto, "Be Prepared." As a Coastie for four years at the Academy and then thirty years of active duty I was taught the motto, "Semper Paratus," which means "Always Ready.

After all that here is Jesus saying, "Be awake." Be ready.

Okay, that's a lifetime of indoctrination. I'm all in. Let's be ready! Let's get prepared! We can do this.

So what are we supposed to do to get ready? We can't stop sinning no matter how hard we try. As Christians we know that. What then does God want from us? How do we know we are forgiven and ready for Christmas and the life ever after?

The answer is simple. We all know it in our hearts. Sometimes it's hard to put into words. I've been a Christian as far back as I can remember, well before the age of 6 and an Episcopalian since marriage. But, I can still remember the day when that question and its answer smacked me in the face.

I had a crazy office mate at the Coast Guard Research and Development Center in Connecticut. Ray was an evangelical who would drop anything if you asked him about Christ. I know, I used to test him when he was deep in optical physics reports. It was fun, especially if I was struggling with an ocean current report. Ray didn't mind. But, it had consequences.

As Ray and I became friends and he realized that I was serious about my faith, he became more serious about me. He gave me books and challenged me to read them. He gave me magazines that posed hard questions. He wanted to ensure that being "Episcopal" meant "watered in baptism" not "watered down in theology." He wanted me to be ready.

One December day he literally turned to me in his chair and said, "Brian, how do you know you are going to heaven when you die?" I set down my report, hemmed and hawed to buy time, and then drew a blank. I was certain there was a correct answer, and that I should be able to spit it out.

The answer, as Ray knew, was because I believed in Jesus. I was going to heaven despite my sins because I truly believed that the Son of God as a baby came into this world on Christmas to atone for me once and for all. And, that now all I had to do was believe...and remember. And celebrate. I'd known that, of course. But suddenly Christmas was more important and more real. My crazy office mate had made it simple. He had helped me to get ready.

So. Christmas is coming. It is the greatest gift that each of us has ever received. In a world mired in sin and suffering, we are free. We are forgiven.

Spread the word. It will confuse people. But, some will come to understand. And don't worry about the timing. Whether you are getting in the spirit quietly through prayer or while humming and pinning up lights, God will see your heart. He'll know that his gift mattered, and one of the Two Great Commandments is being fulfilled. The other is fulfilled when a neighbor asks you about Christ and you don't flinch or stammer. Use the next three weeks to study up if you have to. Flash cards and folded index cards in the wallet might help. But, be ready for the Rays of this world and more importantly for those who are lost. It's what Advent is all about.

Amen.