

Advent 2
Isaiah 40: 1 - 11
Mark 1: 1- 8
December 6, 2020
Bishop Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl

PREPARE is the theme for the 2nd Sunday of Advent. When we think of Advent as the “Get-Ready-For-Christmas” season we can quickly get caught up in preparing, right? I’m a list-maker, so I make a gift list, a grocery list, a to-do list, a list of menus, a card list, and on and on. Back when we traveled for holidays, I’d make a packing list. All about preparing; being *ready* for Christmas. Something about the order that I believed all my lists created was calming when I felt there were too many things to do and never enough time. In truth, not many things on all those lists had much to do with what I believe Christmas is all about: God comes to us in Jesus. Most of my list items were about family traditions and expectations of what a holiday should include, mainly food, but also presents.

I suspect many of you know exactly what I mean about all this preparation. On top of work, school, other roles and jobs, there is the feeling that we need to make Christmas happen. It’s on us to get it right. On us to be prepared; to organize and schedule, to save and to spend so that we pull it all off.

When I led grief groups as a hospital chaplain earlier in my ministry many bereaved people would talk about how they dreaded Christmas without their loved one who had died. When we talked it all through in our support groups often the realization came that it wasn’t so much Christmas itself, it was all the build up that they couldn’t face. All the seeming merriness and joy all around that was hard to rise up to; all the conversations about how much everyone was doing around Christmas which can sound like a competition, of sorts, to see who can out-do one

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another. Those in grief felt it was like a gauntlet to run through where words and attitudes and plans and only happy emotions were the weapons that beat upon these sorrowing souls, until finally Christmas came, and the grieving found themselves sitting quietly in a church pew, listening to ancient songs and prayers, and hearing the old story of God coming in simplicity and poverty to a spectacularly unprepared world.

When we met in the weeks after Christmas, people described how suddenly, the sorrowful felt comforted; suddenly those who lost the competitive sport of preparedness felt valued anyway. Suddenly, preparation meant open ears and hearts and hands were far more important than full ovens and over-present-ed trees. The focus changed for them from having all things ready, to receiving God's great gift....ready or not.

This simple truth about preparedness for Christmas, and about keeping this aspect of Advent faithfully is a lesson I learned again years later. One Advent I made a trip to South Dakota Synod's Companion Synod in Cameroon, Africa, with my family: 3 teenagers at that point, and my husband. The adventure of our lives. We traveled with our hosts tightly packed into one vehicle for many miles over terrible roads only to be greeted by a whole village singing at the edge of town to welcome us to a multi-hour worship service. The roads weren't the only terrible conditions we observed in our travels to the remote and rural parts of our Companion Church's congregations. The people lived in poverty, without basic infrastructure like running water, or garbage control, or stable food sources.

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As Advent's weeks and readings went on at service after service I was struck by the emphasis in our African siblings' church culture. In the absence of Christmas trees, and Advent wreaths, and decorations on every building, their Christmas *spirit* was being prepared. No shopping mall crowds, or supermarket sales, or wrapping paper was involved in their preparing for Christ's birth among them. Our family experienced this, and talked about it with our hosts, (The Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Cameroon). He told us the people were in fact preparing. They were preparing their *joy*.

It was no secret that their lives were difficult and their circumstances challenging. But their Advent focus was on their joy: joy in Jesus; joy in forgiveness; joy in community; joy in love; joy in the sacraments; joy in the hope of eternal life with Christ; joy in so many things. Not artificial joy to put on a brave face. This joy was a clear and honest recognition of all that they struggled with, AND YET....there was joy to prepare. Joy to harvest. Joy to capture and treasure. They searched for it in the midst of their daily struggles to stay alive, to provide shelter for loved ones, and to eek out a living. They searched for joy when none was visible to the untrained eye.

Much like the ELCA Hunger Appeal study we are following this Advent, where community leaders find reasons to hope in the present, though many struggles surround them daily, through working on what will make the future better. They take steps and actions daily toward a better future, toward fulfilling the hope God plants in their hearts. They search for joy, and hope, and love in the midst of discouragement, lack of resources, and personal risks. They persevere in preparing for a fuller joy in the future, and an appreciation of what they CAN do today.

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Thus, they prepare for the future, the fulfillment of their hopes, the promises that will be kept. They prepare for joy.

We hear the call to prepare for joy in today's lessons. In Mark, who writes with urgency about preparing a straight way for the One who is to come. In Isaiah, who also talks about a straight way as a path for bringing comfort to people of God. The rough places will be smoothed; the surprising twists and turns that frighten or paralyze us will be pulled straight, made plain, and clear for us. That is our future in faith. That is our hope for tomorrow, and all the challenges it brings. That is the joy we prepare our hearts for every.single.day. Advent's hope calls us to be ready, to prepare for all that is to come. Better days ahead, certainly, but also training our eyes to see joy in the midst of today.

This kind of preparation was evident in a sweet tweet I read a few days ago. A mother recounted her car conversation with her 8 year-old child. The child asked: "Do you want me to throw the confetti in my pocket?" The mother replied: "No, not in the car! Why do you have confetti in your pocket?" The child: "It's my emergency confetti. I carry it everywhere in case there is good news."

Prepare your Spirit for joy this Advent, in these challenging times, in the midst of your own grief, in the face of deep fatigue. Find comfort in the sure and certain knowledge that our ways will be made straight, our paths smooth. Find hope in the presence of Jesus in our hearts and world bringing new life in all circumstances. Find joy in joining Jesus on this temporarily rocky, twisting, bumpy way. And carry confetti, for surely there is good news....

Amen