

First Sunday Advent Cycle A

Most of us remember when people waited until after Thanksgiving to get ready for Christmas. Now, the stores start right after Halloween or earlier. It's interesting that 500 years ago people in France started preparing for Christmas on November 1, the feast of St. Martin. They were not busy shopping but they prepared by fasting three days a week. And a century later Christians were fasting every day from November 11 until Christmas. This was known as "St. Martin's Lent." The practice spread. As far as we know, this may have been the beginning of Advent.

Many still remember that Advent was a time to do penance or giving up things to prepare for Jesus' birth. Often people received the sacrament of Penance during the time of Advent to better ourselves spiritually. Our world is so different. The practice of spiritual preparation has slipped into the background, while we busy ourselves with so many other projects that we have to finish by December 25. I wonder if those who are trying to get Christ out of Christmas are winning, because in our world today, if Christ plays any part at all in our preparations for His birth, it seems to be minor if at all.

Now, I don't want to sound like the Grinch that stole Christmas... Joy at Christ's birth is certainly an appropriate emotion at this time. And trying to act kindly to one another and showing greater appreciation for those we love is always in season. But commercialism and materialism has, in so many instances, caused us to shift our focus away from the spiritual side of what we are celebrating.

The real spiritual meaning of Christ's birth comes only through prayer and reflection. Fasting, as Christians did centuries ago, is good spiritual preparation. Fasting doesn't always involve food. We could fast from smoking, gambling, entertainment, watching TV, criticizing, spending time with our phones and computers, and keeping so busy that we seldom have time for prayer. Let's not forget the big picture: Christ came down to us for only one reason, to bring us new life, to lift us up to him. It would be a shame to miss the opportunity that Advent offers us; to enrich ourselves spiritually and to open ourselves more fully to God's love.

There is another important reason to take Advent seriously: being ready to meet Jesus, when he comes again, to call us from this life to him. Will we be ready?

Our second reading and the Gospel stress this aspect of Advent. St. Paul said in today's second reading: "it is the hour now to wake from sleep." And Jesus too tells us "Stay Awake!" We never know when the day when we leave this earth. Jesus never promised us tomorrow.

Since it's impossible to always stay awake physically, it is obvious Jesus is talking about staying awake spiritually. The people Jesus gives us as examples in today's Gospel about eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, those working out in the field or grinding corn at the mill were physically awake, but apparently not all were spiritually awake. They were consumed with their everyday activities and were not prepared when God called them.

How can we be spiritually prepared for Jesus? Attending Mass on weekends and Holy Days is a good start, and daily Mass if we can. During the week, after we awake, think about our day with Jesus being with us. Don't turn on the TV, no morning news, it's a distraction. Wait for the 6PM News. Say a prayer before every meal thanking God for our food. Read the daily scriptures, easy to find on the computer, just go to USCCB or read a Bible passage, and let Jesus talk to you. Place picture and symbols of our faith throughout our home, those symbols will keep our focus on Jesus. Pray a tradition prayer throughout the day, and at night review our day, how was I like Jesus today? If not, what can I do better tomorrow? Lastly, join our What We Believe, the beauty of the Catholic faith program next Saturday, December 3rd at 9 am-10:30am.

Our baptism joined us to Christ and separated us from the World that shouts at us constantly to care only for ourselves. Praying unceasingly will drown out society's voice and prayer will keep us spiritually alert. When our personal second coming of Jesus happens, when we leave this earth, our encounter with Jesus will be Heavenly.

I would like to end with an Advent prayer:

God of Love, Your Son Jesus, is your greatest gift to us. Jesus is a sign of your love.

Help us walk in that love during the weeks of Advent, preparing for His coming.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.