

Happy Advent! Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a time when we prepare for the birth of Jesus. But when we heard today's Gospel Lesson we might have wondered what this has to do with preparing for the birth of Jesus. The first section of the Gospel Lesson today, that would be verses 29-31, is very eschatological. The word "eschatology" comes from two Greek words meaning "last" and "study" so it is the study of last things. In the second half of the Lesson, verses 32-44, instead of telling us exactly when all this will happen, Jesus turns the discussion to describe things that will happen. In fact, in verse 36 He tells us that no one, not even the Angels, knows when all this will happen and He gives us some examples of what will be taking place. He says that people will be out and about doing normal everyday things: men working out in the fields and women grinding grain at the mill. But some of the men and women were ready for Christ's second coming and some were not. So because they weren't told when Christ's second coming would happen, they were told to keep watch because the Son of Man will come at an hour least expected.

So just as the men and women in Matthew 24 were being taught and learning how to prepare for Christ's second coming, we find ourselves today at the first Sunday in Advent preparing for the birth of Jesus on Christmas.

Christmas is a wonderful time of the year and we spend all of Advent getting ready. We decorate our homes, put up a tree with all the beautiful ornaments we've collected over the years, we hear Christmas music in the stores, and then there are all those Hallmark Christmas movies. Many of us have family get togethers, sometimes with folk coming in from out of town or even other states. And, of course, we give gifts to one another, trying to find just the perfect item a loved one will treasure for years to come.

But to get to this place of having a happy Christmas, we have some preparing to do. To have the best Christmas tree ever, you have to pick out the perfect tree to purchase or to cut down. You have to make sure all the strings of lights are in working order and that none of the ornaments are broken or damaged. You have to select the ideal location in your house to showcase your tree. And then you have to artfully arrange all those ornaments and lights.

If you're having house guests, you must also prepare. The guest bedroom must pass the white glove test, have fresh linens on the bed and an extra quilt or blanket handy in case of cold snap and the guest bathroom needs all kinds of supplies in addition to sets of clean towels. And then there's the meal planning, grocery shopping, and food prep.

And Christmas gift shopping! Have you ever gone to a large mall on Black Friday? Oh my, facing the mobs in the stores to find that perfect item is a challenge. And don't forget to buy the Christmas paper, ribbon, and gift tags to make the presents look extra special.

Besides all these "busy" things we do to get ready for Christmas, we need to prepare our hearts as well. Even as we prayed in today's Collect that "Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility", so must we in great humility prepare for the coming birth of Jesus. Today, December 1st is the first Sunday of Advent, the time for us to start reflecting on God's gift and love for us in the birth and the giving of his only Son. I'd like us to look at three ways to do just that.

First is your own spiritual life: I'm sure you know the carole "In the Bleak Midwinter". It was written by the English poet Christina Rossetti. The first verse describes the physical circumstances with the frosty wind and the snow on snow. The second verse goes like this: "Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain. Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign. In the bleak mid-winter a stable place sufficed the Lord God Almighty – Jesus Christ". This contrasts Christ's first coming and His second coming. The last verse shifts from a description of circumstances to introspection. It goes "What shall I give Him, poor as I am. If I were a Shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a Wise Man I would do my part – Yet what can I give Him, - give my heart." To give someone your heart, you have to know them. Advent is a wonderful time of the year to know Jesus more. So take time this Advent to get to know Jesus better. Spend time in one of the Gospels during these four weeks; spend time in prayer, reflecting of God's love for each of us in Jesus; pick an Advent devotional book specific to this season. One suggestion is [Love Came Down: Anglican Readings for Advent and Christmas](#) by Christopher Webber.

Second, your family's spiritual life should also be considered. Help your family enjoy the Advent preparation for the birth of Jesus. Use an Advent wreath at the dinner table and talk about what Advent means to each of you. If you have children or grandchildren in the home, let them help set up a nativity set. Get creative! Designate an area in your house as Nazareth, another as Bethlehem, and another as a field for sheep. Place the shepherds and the sheep out in the "field" set aside for them; Mary and Joseph are placed in your Nazareth area, and the Kings placed way far away because they didn't arrive on the scene till some time later. And, of course, hide the Baby Jesus till Christmas morning. As time gets closer and closer to Christmas have the children find new places closer to Bethlehem to place your Mary and Joseph figurines. What a wonderful time this becomes to talk with our children and grandchildren about the meaning of Christmas.

Third, is sharing the love of Jesus in our community. Every year our parish supports the children from the Mary Hayes Center by buying gifts for children who would otherwise have a very lean or no Christmas. Some of these children are being raised in foster homes or by extended family members. Many of the children are from families that have a tough time making ends meet and that's why it's so important for us to continue the tradition of providing Christmas gifts of toys for these kids. George has already placed a box in the back of the nave for you to place your unwrapped gift. In addition to buying a toy, pray for that child as well. You don't know that child personally but you can pray for their health and safety and for their caregivers. And you can pray for the leaders and volunteers at the Mary Hayes Center.

Maybe you will feel led to do something special for one of the Mary Hayes children, something in addition to buying a Christmas toy. When I lived in the Florida Keys I was a member of a parish just about the size of St. Andrew's. Every Thanksgiving and every Christmas we gave out around 20 food boxes, filled with a frozen turkey, bags of stuffing, fresh fruits and vegetables, and lots of canned goods to deserving families in our community. It was never difficult to get parishioners to sign up and deliver a food box. But one year was different. The rector decided that if we were going to deliver one of these wonderful food boxes, we would also have to agree to visit the receiving family once a month and see how things were going for them. If other needs were discovered throughout the year we were to bring those needs back to the church. The ECW had established an outreach fund to help with local community needs. So when one of our families visited a grandmother who was raising her granddaughter, they noticed the granddaughter seemed very tired and lethargic. They questioned the grandmother about this and found out this was a problem that seemed to get worse with time. We made arrangements for the little girl to see a doctor and have a health exam. It was discovered that

the child was diabetic and she was immediately put on a medication for diabetes. What a difference this made in that child's life!

Just as the parishioners looked for needs in the families receiving food boxes, so does the staff at Mary Hayes look for needs in their afterschool program. I have spoken with the director who tells me that long sleeved t-shirts or long-sleeved sweatshirts are very badly needed. She has told me that during cold weather the children are still in short sleeved shirts. These are little children in elementary school who should be in appropriate clothing during our colder weather. So in addition to a toy as a Christmas gift, I'm asking that you also consider purchasing a long sleeved shirt for a child. The size range is listed in this week's *Parish Life*. Leave them on the pew next to the box for toys and I'll gather them up each week. There are 44 children in the program. Sixteen shirts have already been bought, so we only have 28 more to go. The director at Mary Hayes and her staff will match a shirt for each of the children there.

So, here we are at Advent 1. We've talked about how to keep a holy Advent in our personal lives. And we've talked about ways of extending the blessings of Advent into our family life. And we've talked about taking the love of Jesus out into the community through buying a Christmas toy and perhaps a long sleeve shirt for a child at the Mary Hayes Center. But start by taking care of your own spiritual life, by praying, reading, and studying the Word and then reflect on how you will bring the gift of Jesus to others.

"What can I give Him? Give my heart."