

Sermon Advent 2B 2017: Preparing a Way for Christ this Christmas

Missing Christmas

We're gathered together on this Second Sunday of Advent

With a sense of great expectation for the coming of Christmas, just fifteen days away.

For some of us our great expectations are filled with joy and hopefulness;

Sheer excitement over the great day that is so close we can almost touch it;

We can sense that something wonderful is about to happen,

And we're bursting for time to fly by, so we can enjoy Christmas.

For some of us our great expectations for the day are filled with a little worry

Over whether we're going to pull it off in time;

With whether we're going to get everything for everyone on our lists

Taken care of so that Christmas will be a celebration this year;

We're a little hurried and hassled because our lists are long and the time is short.

For some of us our great expectations are balanced with sadness over the state of our lives;

Trouble at home; trouble in the world; people we love who are no longer here;

And we're struggling to even start a list to get ready for the great day.

But whatever our expectations are for this Christmas, we're getting ready, aren't we?

The lights and decorations are being pulled out and put up;

The shopping and wrapping and sending and hiding are well underway;

Cards are being addressed and sent and received and read;

The airwaves and stores are filled with Christmas music;

And the tree is up and the nativity scene is out or will be shortly.

We're all getting ready in our own ways

Making our lists and checking them twice

So that we can lean in fully and enjoy the miracle of Christmas.

But some of us are going to miss Christmas this year;

Some of us in this room this morning are going to let Christmas slip by without us.

Oh, we'll be around on the 25th, God willing;

And we'll have whatever was on our list completed or almost completed;

We'll have the tree up, the presents ready, the food prepared;

But the day will come and go and nothing will be different in our lives

We'll simply pick up where we left off when December 26th comes,

Same old, same old life.

Some of us are going to miss Christmas this year

Because our lists of things to do and places to be are so crowded

That we've left someone very important off our list,

And that's Christ Himself.

Oh, most of us leave Christ off our to-do list many days throughout the year,

But it's particularly troublesome at Christmas time,

Because the purpose of the day, the center of the celebration,

The reason for the season;

Is the miracle of God coming to us in human form;

God coming among us to reveal His great love for us

And to draw us into the life that's truly life.

And if we are going to truly experience Christmas this year by including Christ;

Then our preparations require a different kind of to-do list;

So that Christmas will truly come and so we can receive and give the greatest gift of all.

John Preparing the Way

And in the wisdom of the Church, on this Second Sunday of Advent;

We're confronted with a person who provides a way to change the focus of our list;

We meet a man who demands an alternative list

So that we won't miss Christmas on the 25th and throughout the year.

The man's name was John.

People knew him locally as the Baptist or the Baptizer as St. Mark describes him.

Some would say that John was a religious eccentric or a religious nut;

Others, even less kind, would dismiss him simply as a flake, as an oddball.

And even though John doesn't seem to fit in with shepherds and wise men

And the other characters that we traditionally associate with the Christmas story;

John comes with the most important item on our to-do list

If we're going to experience Christmas this year.

John comes with a clear call to make room for God in our lives;

So that we will be prepared for the physical reality of the day,

As well as the spiritual reality for our whole lives.

John comes to us with a direct, though not a simple message

For changing our to-do lists this Christmas:

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path into your life straight”

Repent, turn, change, look to God in your life;

Confess all those things, all those ways of life

That are keeping you from making room for God;

And be forgiven for your sins.”

John is the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's message from 400 year before;

A message that promised the return of God's people into God's presence;

And a message that calls anyone and everyone to clear the way;

To open our lives back up to God;

To remove whatever is in our life that's keeping us from God

And allow God to enter in.

John's message is direct and understandable, but it's not simple.

It's not simple because the to-do lists for Christmas and the to-do lists in our lives
Have been filled with other things and other priorities for so long
That a lot of us aren't sure we can find our way back to God
And even if we try, we wonder whether God will accept us back.

But the beauty of John's message and God's promise

Is that when we repent, when we turn our faces toward God
God will forgive us;
God will comfort us and be with us;
God will change us and help us to keep Him
At the top of our to-do list at Christmas and every day of our lives.

For the Christ whom John is preparing the way for is the Lord of Love and Life;

The Lord who was willing to give His all for us through his death and resurrection;
So that we may have life now and beyond the door of death;
A life available to every one of us when we change our to-do list
And put God at the top of the list to open the way for our hearts
To welcome God in.

Getting Started: Small Changes and a Different Kind of To-Do List

There's a man named Tim Little who keeps the strangest Christmas to-do list I've ever heard of

And you may find it helpful in getting started in changing your list this Christmas;
And for the rest of the year;
Tim calls it "my refinement list".

He made out his first "my refinement list" when he was forty-five years old

And worked it faithfully for almost thirty years;
And in all that time, it had remained pretty much a secret;
Until one day, when his youngest grandchild came to him,
With a piece of paper in her hand,
Looked Tim right in the eye and asked, "Grandpa, what's this?"

“A special Christmas list”, Tim answered vaguely.

“Is this what you want?” asked the girl;

“It’s not that type of list,” Tim replied;

“Is this what you’re going to give other people?” she asked,

Wishing she could read it for herself.

“Well no, it’s not that kind of list either,” he replied.

Then searching for words to explain something he felt was important and wanted to pass on

He drew his granddaughter into his lap and told her,

“A few weeks before Christmas every year,

I write down the things I’d like God to help me get rid of.

Things like selfishness or being impatient with your grandmother

Or wanting only what I want instead of what’s good for everyone;

Things like giving up some of my activities

So I can spend a little time with God every day.

I figure the more I get rid of things like that,

The more I’ll be able to experience and enjoy all the good things

God gives us all at Christmas and throughout the year.”

Tim’s granddaughter looked into her grandfather’s eyes, slightly confused;

Gave him a hug and then went back to playing.

That’s the kind of to-do list that John the Baptist is talking about this Advent;

A list of changes that make more room for God in our lives

And draw us closer to the life He invites us to live with Him and for Him.

And so, on this Second Sunday of Advent, with fifteen days to go before Christmas;

I invite you to take another look at your Christmas to-do list

So that you won’t miss Christmas this year or any year.

Move some things that are pushing God out further down the page

Move some things like time for prayer and being still onto the list;

Find some time to read your Bible, the Gospels are always a good place to start

Because you can hear some of the words of the grown up Jesus;

Put something on your list to do something for others;

Anything that will open the way for the love and joy of Christ to enter in

So that Christmas will truly come

And so that you'll know the joy and grace of God in your life every day.

But you better hurry,

Christmas is almost here;

And God doesn't want any of us to miss it.

Amen.