

ADVENT 2 – YEAR A
“PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS”
The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

There are only 23 days left until Christmas. Attention, I repeat, there are only 23 days left. Are you ready? Here we go again, another year and we are searching for ways to make the perfect Christmas (William Willmon, Pulpit Resource). We want to find the perfect tree, so we drive all over, then take our treasure home to richly decorate it. We have to search for the perfect present for everyone on the lists. That takes us to the malls, the internet and means lots of money! We want to attend or give the perfect party. There is all that food! (There goes my waistline again). That means desserts and wearing our finest clothes. We search for the perfect Christmas experience ... so we go off to see Santa Claus, the Nutcracker and the Messiah. This is all in pursuit of the perfect Christmas.

The Church is no less caught up in the pursuit of the perfect Christmas. We want the perfect flowers ... memorials for our loved ones and beautiful decorations for the building. We search for the perfect nativity scene, the perfect decorations, the perfect candles. Everything has to be just right for Christmas. There will be the perfect Christmas concert, and the perfect Christmas pageant. Ah yes! The perfect Christmas. We prepare, get ready, and spend a lot of time, energy and money to make sure Christmas is perfect. But what are we really getting ready for this time of year? Is there anything, or anyone, missing?

The only problem for me is that Christmas doesn't come off in perfect ways. My experience with Christmas trees is less than stellar. There was the year I decided we would be ecologically correct and buy a live tree. First of all, they don't warn you how heavy those trees are with the ball of dirt. Next, they fail to mention that you may not be able to get the tree through the door. I resorted to ripping open the ball and dropping the dirt in a wash tub. There's another problem.

They don't tell you that live trees come back to life in the warm house (out of hibernation). They also forget to tell you that you should dig the hole while the weather is warm. There is nothing like trying to dig a hole in the frozen January ground. All this and the live Christmas tree died!

Then there is another year when you decide to take your family out into the woods to cut down your live tree. The perfect family trip, except it snows so bad you can barely see when you are driving. Your family seems less than enthusiastic, especially the three year old bundled up like the last Eskimo! As you stomp through the woods to the tree site, none are close to the road, your son is crying and complaining as the big, fat snowflakes smack him in the face. So much for the perfect face!

What about the pursuit of the perfect present? What is the most popular gift for your kids this year? Remember Cabbage Patch Kids? I can remember standing in line with 100 other parents before the store opens. The manager comes to the door and announces that there are only 20 dolls available. By now, the crowd has grown to several hundred. Sigh. Then there is the perfect experience, going to see Santa with the kids only to face long lines with cranky kids! Or worse yet, Santa isn't there at all!

It just goes on and on. We pursue the perfect Christmas, but it remains elusive as ever. The same thing happens in Church. The beautiful flowers raise complaints. The choir isn't ready for the concert. I have yet to experience a perfect Christmas pageant. I call pageants nothing more than creative chaos! There are always the missed cues, lost shepherds, unhappy angels, noise and confusion! Perfection seems so elusive!

Now in Advent, in our preparations, we come face to face with John the Baptist. John will help us find the perfect Christmas? This is a prophet with a stern message, repent! For the evangelist Matthew, the act of repentance is important in Advent. Jesus himself will call on the people to do the same thing later in the Gospel. What does repent mean? It comes from the Greek word “metanoeo.” It means to change one's mind

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(Reginald Fuller). John adds in the text that we are to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” This is more than just changing one’s mind! John calls us to prepare for Christmas by living into the changed life. We are to change our lives. We are to repent, be baptized, and change our ways! John the Baptist points us towards the perfect Christmas. He points us towards Jesus!

This time of year there are movies that remind us of how Christmas changes us. I’m a movie buff and I find some appropriate preparation in these three movies. First, there is Dr. Suess’ “The Grinch that stole Christmas.” I prefer the cartoon version that came out many years ago (rather than the latest remake with Jim Carey!). The Grinch’s whole purpose is to find a way to keep Christmas from coming. At the center of this creature is one who’s heart is too small. It makes him a mean one. The Grinch finds that Christmas comes anyway, despite all his efforts to stop it. He removed all the signs, trees, presents and decorations. But Christmas comes anyway, and Suess says that it doesn’t come from a store! The Grinch has a change of heart. It transforms him and he takes action to celebrate and restore what he has taken. That’s a pretty significant change!

Another familiar and powerful Christmas book and movie is Charles Dickens’ “The Christmas Carol.” This popular movie has been remade over and over and continues to carry a powerful message. There is old Scrooge, saying Christmas is “Bah! Humbug!” I think about this time of year, it’s a feeling shared by many of us! Three spirits are sent to confront Scrooge. He must deal with Christmas past, present and future. He comes face to face with his own mortality. Scrooge learns the true meaning of Christmas ... which is found in sharing ourselves with others. He has to decide what to do with his life, and what consequences it will carry in the afterlife! Scrooge is a changed man!

Finally, one of my favorites is the Bishop’s wife. I prefer the Cary Grant, David Niven and Lana Turner version of the 50’s, but watch the Whitney Houston and Denzel Washington version if you choose. What is powerful here is that the person to be transformed is a church person. In the older version, a bishop! The religious man has too narrow a view of what the season is all about. He also is ignoring important people in his pursuit of “perfection.” It takes an angel to set him straight. What is really important in life? Even the Bishop has to relearn this lesson. Where is Christ in all his preparations? He finally comes to see that he has ignored those who love him, and those who truly are important at this time of year. The bishop is changed, transformed.

In all of our Advent preparations we must remember that “Jesus is the reason for the season.” We must avoid the traps of culture and our own narrow thinking. In the Gospel, John confronts those with a narrow view, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. For them, there is only one way to celebrate anything. For them, it has to be perfect and done only their way. For them we hear the common echoes of our own time, if only I had more time, talent or money I could make Christmas perfect. The folly lies in our thinking that we can make Christmas perfect.

What are we moving towards in Advent? How will we bear fruit? It is God who makes Christmas perfect in the gift of Jesus. With this child comes hope and transformation, love and forgiveness, welcome and the ability to fire a passion in us for God’s people and creation. Christmas is coming anyways, despite our pursuit of perfection! We will never be able to have the perfect Christmas, because the perfect Christmas has already come. His name is Jesus. How will he change our lives? How will this Christmas be different for each of us?