

MAKING PREPARATIONS

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD..."

ISAIAH 40:3A (NKJV)

Thunder in the desert! "Prepare for GOD's arrival!" ISAIAH 40:3A (THE MESSAGE)

READ ISAIAH 40:1-5

Preparation is a very important part of any meaningful experience. Recently my wife, Linda, and I took a trip to California. The trip lasted 10 days, but the preparation started months ahead of time. Not having been there before, we studied the best places to go and the most interesting things to see. We read travel guides, travel logs, and talked to people who had been there before. Then we laid out our travel route, determined how much time to spend in the various places, how much time to travel between places, and where we could stay for the night. Then we booked airline travel and made rental car and motel reservations.

That was a lot of preparatory work, but the result was a wonderful trip. We visited redwood forests and giant sequoia tree groves. We saw the majestic mountains of Yosemite National Park. We traveled the awe-inspiring coastal highway along the Pacific Ocean, and so much more.

How much we would have missed if we had not prepared but just took off and traveled without any plan or purpose.

I say this to remind us that Advent is a time of preparation. Isaiah said, "Prepare the way of the Lord," or as Eugene Peterson put it in *The Message*, "Prepare for GOD'S arrival." As we look forward to Christmas, are we preparing for God's arrival? It's easy to get caught up in the physical preparations of decorations and parties and gift buying and exchanging. But what are we doing to prepare our spirits to celebrate God becoming Man? We should be worshiping regularly as well as reading our Bibles and praying daily. We should be getting our hearts in a place where we can truly encounter the Incarnate Christ and celebrate the redemptive plan of God in Christ Jesus.

The hymn writer wrote "Let every heart prepare Him room" Have you prepared Him room in your heart? As you prepare to celebrate Christmas, the coming of God in Christ Jesus, are you also prepared for when He comes again? One day "every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father." (Philippians 2:10-11) That day may be sooner than you think! What are you doing to prepare for God's arrival?

Heavenly Father, as I move through this Advent season, help me to prepare my heart to celebrate the true experience of Christmas, and to prepare and be prepared for that day when Christ shall come again. In His name I pray, Amen.

PASTOR GARY TURK, RETIRED

PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.

And all people will see God’s salvation.”

LUKE 3:4-6 (NIV)

I remember when I was a very young boy waiting for Christmas to come. Every year the anticipation grew and was almost more than I could endure. Those 24 days from December 1 to Christmas Eve seemed to pass so slowly that I was barely able to wait for that magical night when Santa would come with gifts for everyone and leave them under our Christmas tree.

Now, as an adult, those 24 days seem to go much too fast, and I find myself wanting to experience the full spiritual beauty and depth of the Advent season. I want to take in the words and music of every Christmas carol that is sung, and I want to proclaim like Mary, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... holy is his name.” (Luke 1:46-49 NIV)

What a joy to read the scriptures that tell of the coming of our Savior who will heal, save, and bring such joy to the world. The Advent and Christmas seasons are about God’s divine love for us and our human love and compassion for those with whom we share the miracle of God’s salvation, through His Son, who came into the world as a blessed infant.

As a child I treasured Christmas for myself. Now I treasure it as a time to share His salvation, that most perfect of all gifts. He has given us this gift to be the star atop the spiritual Christmas tree of our hearts.

My most beautiful childhood memory is that of seeing the infant Jesus appear in His manger in the creche under our tree. Every year, my mother waited until I was asleep on Christmas Eve, and then she placed Jesus in the manger with Mary and Joseph by His side. On Christmas day she would show me the baby Jesus and say, “Now it’s Christmas, for Jesus is born.”

The thrill of Christmas day has been and always will be a miracle, even at this stage of my life. I pray that the spiritual preparation and anticipatory joy of this Advent season bring you to the true meaning of Christmas.

MICHAEL PATRICK MURPHY
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

THE FIG TREE

Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.
MATTHEW 21:19 (NIV)

I am learning through Bible studies that the Lord used examples of everyday life in His teachings so that listeners would be able to readily understand.

Recently I came across an article in my fig research entitled "Fig Fruit Stays Green – Reasons Figs Don't Ripen" by Heather Rhoades (gardeningknowhow.com). The article reveals a common question gardeners with fig trees often ask: "How long does it take for a fig to ripen on the tree?" Ideally, figs can ripen in as little as two months, but most do not grow in ideal conditions. One reason is stress, which slows down or stops fruit ripening. The most common stressor is lack of water. Others may include pests, diseases, and lack of nutrients.

Compare this process to our faith walk with the Lord. Some of us ripen and grow in our faith at different times. We may not all be in the ideal condition to grow or even know our Lord. We may not see the Lord as our source in which we need to grow.

We may not supply nutrients such as praying, Bible study, fellowship, or worship services, and therefore our growth may be stunted. We may come under attack of disease or pests that can stop our growth — many of these are prevalent in today's culture: worry, fear, addiction, sexual immorality, violence, famine, and many others.

Just as the fig tree article recommends removing as many stress factors as possible — especially ensuring that there is plenty of water and fertilization for the tree — we also need to follow that advice in our faith walk. We need to stay rooted in Christ, feeding and nurturing our faith so that we continue to ripen and grow in Him.

Lord, please help us see you as our source of life so that we do not wither and die. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LACY HAYNICZ
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

HE CARRIED ME

*Even to your old age, I am He
and even to gray hairs I will carry you!
I have made, and I will bear:
Even I will carry, and will deliver you.*
ISAIAH 46:4 (NKJV)

Last night I was asked, “Were there times when the Lord carried you?” We had been talking about the poem *Footsteps in the Sand*.

I didn’t have to think too long on this subject. Yes, there were many times the Lord picked me up and carried me: the times I have had surgeries; the times at night being alone and afraid of what the next day would bring; the passing of my son at a young age; being left alone when my husband passed; the trials at my age of helping my son, Michael, raise a young child before he remarried; then learning how to live with added family members.

One day this past September was a perfect time for this question. I had needles injected in my back to ease the pain I have had since last November. As I was lying on the operating table, the doctor said, “This will burn a little.” I decided to say the Lord’s Prayer. Repeating it three times got me through. Yes, He carried me again.

You just have to love Him for what He does for us!

Lord, thank you for carrying me in your loving arms. Amen.

JANE KOPONICK
EVANGELICAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

TODAY IS ST. NICHOLAS DAY

St. Nicholas Day is celebrated on December 6 in Belgium and the Netherlands. The story goes that St. Nicholas, a bishop of Myra in Asia Minor in the third century, gave food and money to the needy. Tradition has it that one night he dropped gold coins through an open window of a girl who didn’t have enough money for a dowry. The coins fell in a stocking that had been hung up to dry; some fell in her shoes. Word spread of this anonymous donor. He continued to care for the poor and became linked to a variety of gift-giving occasions. December 6 was the day of his death.

Many other countries adopted the traditions of hanging up stockings or putting out shoes for St. Nicholas to fill on Christmas Eve

THE UNEXPECTED SAVIOR

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

MATTHEW 1:22 (NIV)

Jesus Christ came into this world as the unexpected Savior. In Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 9:6-7, the prophet foretold of His coming. But 700 years later, Israel had forgotten to expect Him. Unexpected happenings find us each day. Some thrill, some wound. But in all of them, God is with us.

Joseph and Mary had the unexpected happen to them. They were betrothed, not married. In their culture, a betrothal was binding, as good as married. Joseph found out Mary was with child. Not theirs. How miserable he must have been! He would have to consider a quiet divorce because he did not want to disgrace her publicly.

That night the glory of God filled Joseph’s dream in a most unexpected way. An angel came and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:20) Joseph was also told that Mary was giving birth to a son, *Jesus*, meaning “He will save us.” They will call him *Immanuel*, which means “God with us.”

Joseph’s reaction was so powerful! When the angel finished speaking, Joseph awoke and believed and did what the angel of the Lord commanded him. He was a servant of the Lord who refused to be led by shame. No wonder God chose him to raise His Son. He inspires us so that even when unexpected difficult days happen, we can take courage that God is with us.

Advent points us toward Christ, remembering He is *God with us* — Immanuel. Let us all EXPECT Him each day!

Father, I give you thanks in all circumstances and take joy in knowing that you are with me even when I am surprised by the unexpected. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

BARBARA MOIST
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

THE COMING EVENT!

Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.

MATTHEW 3:3 (NKJV) ALSO READ MATTHEW 3:1-3

Before becoming a pastor, I was one of those people who would ask through Advent, “When are we going to sing Christmas hymns?” We hear the secular ones in the stores and on the radio. Why do we sing such gloomy hymns? I wanted to sing the great hymns. At that time I didn’t realize how important Advent was.

With all of the disasters around us, our church has been speaking of being prepared for challenging events. It’s easy to accumulate supplies for a disaster. Just check off the important life-sustaining items you’ll need.

But what things do we accumulate, or how do we prepare for the only real life-sustaining event of our lives?

As Israel waited to be freed from exile, they had no idea when God would answer their prayers. One thousand years of waiting for a Savior, and then He came in the form of a baby. No hope of liberty any time soon!

We are an instant generation. We wait for no one, including Jesus. We rush His birth with our Christmas shopping, decorations, Hallmark movies, and radio music — all starting right after Halloween. Never once do we consider how this rushing might affect our worship of Jesus. And for what reason do we rush? “To get it over with.” No build-up in anticipation of the sacrifice He made by giving up all He had to be flesh among us, to woo us to our eternally sustained life. The only preparations we make are the tinsel of the “holiday.”

John the Baptist said, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make the road straight for Him.” (Expanded Bible) He meant make the road of our heart straight — he preached repentance as preparation for the coming of the Lord.

Slow down! Few of us really expect or want anything deeply spiritual to happen to us this season, especially if it requires us to change. So I’m going to pray that all who read this will join me in praying for a repentant heart for our disregard of Jesus’ sacrifice, a revival of God’s Spirit within us, God to use this booklet to slow us down and cause us to wait with anticipation for Jesus’ coming, and God to speak to each of us in an exciting, personal way this Advent.

Dear Lord, I pray that we savor the time we have waiting on Jesus’ gift to each of us — life eternal. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen!

PASTOR SHERRY ZAPPOLA
NEW HOPE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

LONG WALK

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

EPHESIANS 5:1-2 (ESV)

A couple of years ago I was asked to buy snow boots for a single mom who was in need. Although it was close to Christmas, I thought it would be a quick find and an easy task. However, that was not the case. I walked and walked and walked, looking for the right size boots. I am not a person who likes to shop so I found this very frustrating. Finally, after many visits to many stores, I found the boots!

After my success, I was reminded of a story about an African boy who listened carefully as his teacher explained why Christians give presents to each other on Christmas day:

“The gift is an expression of our joy over the birth of Jesus and our friendship for each other,” she said.

When Christmas day came, the boy brought to the teacher a seashell of lustrous beauty.

“Where did you ever find such a beautiful shell?” the teacher asked as she gently fingered the gift.

The youth told her that there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found. When he named the place, a certain bay several miles away, the teacher was left speechless.

“Why ... why, it’s gorgeous ... wonderful, but you shouldn’t have gone all that way to get a gift for me.”

His eyes brightening, the boy answered, “Long walk part of gift.”

I think the little African boy had the right idea. The real gift wasn’t the shell; it was the sacrifice he had to make to give it. And my long walk was part of the gift for this single mom I didn’t know. It was the giving of myself in love to another person, and that is what Christmas is about.

God showed us that the most precious gifts cannot be bought or sold. He gave us His Son who loved us enough to make the journey to Earth so that He might give of Himself to save us. Because He loves us, He chose to come down and walk among us.

Dear God, thank you for the gift you gave us through your Son, Jesus Christ. I pray that this year as I shop I will remember that a “long walk,” the giving of myself in love to others, is the greatest gift of all because you took a long walk to Calvary for me.

LINDA TURK

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH