

Advent & Christmas 2015: “Cross My Heart”
God's Strange, Yet Wonderful Promise
Sermon on Jeremiah 33:14-16 & Luke 21:25-36 (11/28 & 11/29/15)
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Today marks the beginning of the Advent season, the season during which we prepare – and *wait* – for Christmas.

Every year around this time, Christians in The United States typically find themselves busy with one or more of the following kinds of things:

decorating inside and outside their particular home...purchasing any necessary items to do said decorating...purchasing gifts for family, friends, co-workers, etc...
purchasing things for yourself because they're on super-sale at your favorite retail establishments...going to holiday parties...visiting various relatives.

You know what keeps you busy around this time of year. By and large, the things that keep most of us the most busy right about now are the things we do to make *outward* preparations for Christmas.

And, whatever you choose for yourself as far as *outward* preparations for Christmas go, I hope and pray you will choose to make abundant *inward* preparations as well: inward preparations like prayer...reflection...and worship – both at home and with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

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Our culture makes it pretty easy for us to do all of the *outward* preparations we like to make for Christmas: the stores are open, the merchandise is available...you know how it is. It's those *inward* preparations that are a little more difficult to do in our culture – because prayer, reflection, and worship take time...they often require quiet. And, of course, *time* and *quiet* are not always easy to come by in our busy, noisy culture.

Believe it or not, I – your *pastor* – sometimes fail to spend time in devotions and prayer...and it's not because I don't *have* the time to do it – we all *have* the same amount of time in every day – it's because I sometimes fail to *take* the time. I am far better about this than I ever used to be, but it is definitely an area of continuing growth for me.

Yet, I know that, when I take the time for prayer and devotions, I feel more centered... more focused on what needs to be done during any given day...I'm more settled when decisions come my way or when something happens that bothers or saddens me. When I take time for devotions, I'm simply more *prepared* for everything. During the season of Advent, we are reminded – more than ever – how important it is to be *prepared*. To be ready. And not just for December 25th the *day*.

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The season of Advent is meant to help us prepare for Jesus' coming in three important ways. First, Advent prepares us for the coming of Jesus Christ on Christmas. This is the easy one to remember because we experience this part of Advent preparations pretty much anywhere we go this time of year: we prepare for the remembrance of Jesus' birth as we set-up Christmas trees, as we plan children's programs, attend parties, and shop for gifts before December 25th.

The second way we prepare for Christ's coming during Advent is for his coming into our hearts and lives in the here and now: offering us forgiveness, challenging us to new ways of loving and living, blessing us with comfort and healing when we most need it.

Preparing in this way is what special Advent devotionals are all about and I would encourage each of you to find ways to do this kind of daily preparation as we head toward Christmas. If you have an Advent calendar at your home, perhaps you could consider spending time in devotion and prayer before opening the day's "calendar door" to have your little piece of chocolate, or what have you.

And the third way we prepare for Christ's coming during Advent is to prepare for his coming at the end of time, when he will judge the nations, when he will judge the righteous and unrighteous, and when he ushers in the time when God will bring final restoration to all of Creation. Some people call this the Second Coming of Christ...others call it the Final Judgment.

Most people I know try not to dwell on it too much because it's a bit scary and overwhelming to think about! And it *is* a little scary and overwhelming to think about. But it *is* part of Advent.

We heard it in the reading from Luke 21 when Jesus said, "Strange things will happen to the sun, moon, and stars. The nations on earth will be afraid of the roaring sea and tides, and they won't know what to do. People will be so frightened that they will faint because of what is happening to the world. Every power in the sky will be shaken.

"Then the Son of Man will be seen, coming in a cloud with great power and glory. When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave. You will soon be set free."

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Several years ago, right around the start of Advent, I saw a t-shirt design online with a picture of Jesus' face front and center with this text around the picture:
"Jesus is coming. Look busy!"

The design made me chuckle a little bit and I think about it often: “Jesus is coming. Look busy!”

Frankly, most of us don't have to work too hard to look busy. But, our reading from Luke 21 – and the season of Advent in general – should inspire us to consider being busy with the *right* things.

It's *easy* to simply be busy. “Busy” is almost like a drug in our culture: many of us feel like we should be doing something all the time – and we can end up getting ourselves so busy with all sorts of things that we don't end up busy with the *right* things.

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Jesus said in Luke 21 that the day of his return will come as a surprise to everyone, so it doesn't do us any good to dwell too much on when or how it'll happen. (And most of us know plenty of people over the centuries have made all sorts of predictions about the day of Jesus' return...predictions that fell flat when their appointed day arrived.)

But just because we don't know when or how Jesus will come back in the “big, official, end times” sort of way, doesn't mean we shouldn't do what we can to prepare our hearts and minds for him...because he *does* come to us daily.

In fact, it's a promise from God that we will experience Christ's presence every day. And that's what's behind our “Cross My Heart” Advent and Christmas theme here at McCabe – this *promise* that God will be with us always.

We'll talk more about this theme in the coming weeks. But, today, know this promise of Christ's presence is good news for this season. Good news for *all* seasons. And it's a promise worth preparing for. Amen.