

**Advent & Christmas 2015: “Cross My Heart”**  
***Promised Messenger, Promised Message***  
**Sermon on Malachi 3:1-4 & Luke 3:1-16 (12/5 & 12/6/15)**  
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I'm going to begin this message with a short reading by pastor and writer Frederick Buechner. It's a piece Buechner wrote called “Advent” and, when I discovered it years ago, it quickly became something I read in a sermon nearly every year when the season of Advent comes around.

The imagery in this piece is quite powerful so, if it's helpful for you, you may want to close your eyes as I read. Frederick Buechner writes this:

“The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in the darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised the baton.

“In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of silence itself. You hold your breath to listen.

“You walk up the steps to the front door. The empty windows at either side of it tell you nothing, or almost nothing.

“For a second you catch a whiff in the air of some fragrance that reminds you of a place you've never been and a time you have no words for. You are aware of your beating heart.

“The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. *Advent* is the name of that moment.

“The Salvation Army Santa Claus clangs his bell. The sidewalks are so crowded you can hardly move. Exhaust fumes are the chief fragrance in the air, and everybody is [so bundled up against the wind and the chill they seem too oblivious to really know what all the fuss is about].

“But if you concentrate just for an instant, far off in the deeps of yourself, somewhere you can feel the beating of your heart. For all its madness and lostness – not to mention your own – you can hear *the world itself* holding its breath.”<sup>1</sup>

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Welcome to week 2 of the Advent season – the season of waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ: the coming of Christ on Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup>...

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. “Advent” in *Beyond Words*.

the coming of Christ at the end of time in the final culmination when God will restore all things...and, the season of waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ *daily* into our lives and world.

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*“The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in the darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised the baton ... The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”*

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Welcome. Welcome to this holy season where, as Frederick Buechner so eloquently wrote, “the extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.”

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Last week here at McCabe, we spent a significant portion of each service preparing our worship spaces with our annual Hanging of the Greens. Historically, the Hanging of the Greens has taken place only during our 10:00 Sunday morning service...but, this year, for the first time, we included Hanging of the Greens in all 4 of our weekend services.

What a gift for *all* of our worshipers to be able to participate in that presentation during which we “dress” our worship spaces with so many symbols of the season: the Christmas tree...the Nativity scene...garlands and wreaths of evergreen...the Advent wreath with its 5 symbolic candles...and, of course, the gorgeous poinsettias.

Our Hanging of the Greens presentation is no small effort and, at each of our services last weekend, it involved many, *many* people. I am exceedingly grateful to everyone who participated: it was a big deal and it was a *lot* of behind-the-scenes work for those who put it together.

In fact, it was so much work that, I would imagine there were moments – perhaps *many* moments – when those who put our Hanging of the Greens together thought to themselves, “Is this really *worth* all this work?” My answer to that is an enthusiastic, “Yes!” Because things that are a big deal also tend to be a lot of work.

And, here in the church, certain times and seasons are a bigger deal than others: Advent and Christmas are just such times and seasons. It's a big deal to welcome Christ into our world on Christmas...and it is *just* as big of a deal to prepare to welcome Christ during the *Advent* season.

We know Advent is a 4-week build-up to Christmas...but the build-up is important. The waiting and the preparations are necessary.

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*“The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.”*

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Advent and Christmas go hand-in-hand.

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This past Wednesday, our first- and second-year Confirmation classes met together and we talked about the season of Advent: what it means, how we honor it...things like that.

As we began our class session on Wednesday, I explained to the students that, historically, the season of Advent was meant to be a time of somber reflection – much like the church season of Lent which prepares us for the Easter celebration.

During Advent, as Christians prepared for Jesus' coming on Christmas, they were supposed to spend time in confession and repentance for their sins...making up for mistakes and focusing on getting their hearts “right” with God and with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

When I explained this to our Confirmation students this past Wednesday, I asked them why Christians in the past might have thought it was a good idea to spend the season of Advent like that...why it might make sense to prepare for Jesus' coming at Christmas by spending time confessing your sins and getting right with God and neighbor.

I asked them what those ideas made them think about and one of our students raised her hand and said this:

“It makes me think about how, when your teacher leaves the classroom and everyone starts talking and doing things they're not supposed to do...but, then, when someone sees the teacher is coming back, everyone starts doing what they're supposed to be doing again.”

Honestly, I'm not sure I've heard a more perfect analogy for the historic understanding of the season of Advent.

Most of us likely know the experience of the teacher or the coach or the parent leaving the room for a moment and then everything gets out of control – until you notice the teacher or coach or parent is coming back. You don't want to get in trouble, so you quickly get to doing what you were “supposed to” be doing.

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We Christians often have the sense that Jesus is not with us in the day-to-day...so we occasionally behave in ways we would likely *never* behave if we could always see him in the room with us.

We gossip...we're cruel – either to someone's face or behind their back... we're disrespectful to people who think differently than we do...we ignore the needs of those around us...we blame others for our own mistakes. It's all part of “human nature,” but it's ugly – and God absolutely knows I struggle with all of it as much as the next Christian does.

The season of Advent is a time to remember that, regardless of the fact that we can't see him among us, Christ *is* already with us – even as we prepare for his coming on Christmas. He is already among us...so we should perhaps behave like the students who shape up when they see their teacher headed back toward their classroom after a brief absence.

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It's not unlike the message John the Baptist brought to the crowds 2,000 years ago as he prepared people for Jesus' ministry among them. “Turn back to God and be baptized, then your sins will be forgiven,” he said.

John was the promised messenger the prophet Isaiah spoke of centuries before – the messenger who would call for the people to “Get the road ready for the Lord!”

The crowds asked John what they were to do in order to make these preparations for the coming of the Lord. To the crowds he then said, “Do something to show that you really have given up your sins ... If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have any. If you have food, share it with someone else.”

To tax collectors, John said, “Don't make people pay more than they owe,” and to Roman soldiers he said, “Don't force people to pay money to make you leave them alone and be satisfied with your pay.” According to John, preparing to welcome the Lord is about generosity – it's about looking beyond ourselves and giving to others who are in need.

It's also about conducting your business and your life with integrity and compassion. Doing these things is evidence that you're serious about giving up selfish, sinful ways.

And it seems these *preparations* are just as important as the thing for which we're preparing. I suspect that's because, when we are not adequately prepared for something important, we can't *experience* the thing as fully as possible.

*“The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.”*

If the audience doesn't quiet down when the houselights dim, they might miss the glorious opening notes of the concert. If the students misbehave while the teacher is out of the room, they might get in trouble when she or he comes back.

And when we followers of Jesus don't adequately prepare our hearts and lives for his daily presence among us, we might miss him entirely.

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Our reading from Luke held the reminder that Isaiah had promised a messenger like John the Baptist would come to prepare the way of the Lord. Our reading from Malachi held news of the same promised messenger.

Again, God said through the prophet Malachi, "The messenger you desire is coming with my promise." So, according to these words from Malachi, the message being brought by the promised messenger is itself a promise. *The message being brought by the promised messenger is itself a promise.*

That may seem strange because a "promise" is not necessarily a tangible thing. A promise is an idea, sometimes with words or symbols attached. When we're kids, we make a promise to someone and seal it with the words, "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye."

*"Cross my heart..."*

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During the Advent season, we remember that Christmas itself is a promise from God's own heart – a promise that came to us in the form of Jesus Christ whose birth, life, and sacrificial death on the cross make real God's presence among us.

A *promised* presence. "Cross my heart," God said to the world.

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It's so fitting that we would celebrate Holy Communion today as we experience the messages of our readings from Malachi and Luke. It's so fitting because, when we celebrate Holy Communion, we have Christ with us *tangibly* in the bread and the cup.

When we celebrate Communion, there is no way to forget Jesus' constant presence with us because he is right there on that table, mysteriously among us in the bread we will break and in the juice we will drink. That bread and juice will then nourish us to go into the world to share his life and love with others.

What a perfect way to continue our Advent preparations. Amen.