

December 6 2020 PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Homily for Sunday, December 6, 2020

Preparation is a key focus during Advent. It is a time to Prepare for the Unexpected ways that God wants to break into our world. In our moments of preparation -- prayer, solitude, service -- God has the capacity to surprise us in special ways - ways that fill us with joy, calm, peace. In my own time of preparation, in my moments of reflection, I like to read, and I particularly like to re-read books – fiction or non fiction – that continually open my heart to the unexpected.

SCREEN: *photo of the novel A Tale of Two Cities (if possible, see attached photo)*

Charles Dickens is remembered at Christmastime for his wonderful story, A Christmas Carol, a story of brutal self-examination and a radical change of heart. Another Dickens' novel to read during this time of the year is the one he wrote in 1859, called A Tale of Two Cities. Set before, during and after the French Revolution, it is about the inner revolution of a man named Sydney Carton – an English barrister, who experiences conversion and transforms his life by giving it up for the sake of another. He does the unexpected. He changes his life. God has surprised him with a moment of conversion he never thought possible.

The man he saves is a French aristocrat named Charles Darnay, who must leave London and his family and return to Paris in the midst of the French Revolution to save his devoted servant from the Guillotine. Once there, he himself is imprisoned and then condemned to death for the crimes of his father and uncle. His wife Lucie and his friends desperately try to save him, but to no avail.

It is only Sydney Carton who conceives a possible way out. He is a brilliant lawyer who has nearly destroyed his life through alcohol and isolation. But one thing keeps him going and that is his unrequited love for Lucie, the wife of Charles Darnay. Though he respects her marriage, he too has made a vow – that he would do ANYTHING to save her and to save anyone she loved who was in need. He now has that opportunity, an opportunity that has unexpected results.

Sydney Carton bears a striking resemblance to Charles Darnay, and on the night before Charles is to be killed, Sydney visits him in prison and, as can only happen in a Dickens' novel, switches places with him. Charles escapes to London with his family and Sydney stays in prison, waiting to go to the Guillotine. After Sydney dies, Dickens reflects on the thoughts that may have gone through Sydney's head as he walked up the scaffold to his death. They are the words that end A Tale of Two Cities: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

SCREEN: Special Delivery main screen

Preparing for the Unexpected brings us to Week two of our Advent message series titled, **Special Delivery**. For us **to prepare** to welcome the Son of God at Christmas, we need to look for God **in unexpected places**. The Church helps us with this by providing a different kind of reading material: the Scripture readings of Advent which describe some unexpected encounters with God.

In the first reading the prophet Isaiah offered this message about God:

**SCREEN: *A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!
Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!***

For the Jewish people the desert was the place where God often appeared and spoke. Moses first met God there in a burning bush. When the Israelites were led by Moses out of Egypt, they wandered in the desert for 40 years until they entered the Promised Land. In the desert, God was with them - guiding them, speaking to them, molding them into his Chosen People. So for them the desert is God's place, an unexpected place of amazing beauty, power and love.

And Isaiah then provides us with the most gentle and loving image of God you could imagine: feeding, gathering, holding his people close and leading with care. This part of Isaiah is about the hopes of the Israelites in exile in Babylon around 537 BC. They could go home, King Cyrus says so, but they're afraid. Isaiah's job was to persuade the Jews to go back to Jerusalem. They are to think of it as God leading them home, like a shepherd leading the flock. With compassion, comfort and kindness, God will bring the exiles home.

Isaiah helps them with the first word of the first reading: "Comfort." God tells Isaiah to comfort his people. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," God says, "and proclaim to her that her time of trial is coming to an end. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." God is saying to the people: As hard as it gets, **I will not leave you alone**.

In Advent God calls each of us to focus on our own home, our heart center, our own relationship with God. It is what our hope is rooted in. Like the Israelites, God wants to comfort us in our time of distress, and God wants to be reconciled, by offering forgiveness. God's response was so unexpected. Instead of punishment or judgment, God offers us mercy and love, tenderness and compassion. According to Isaiah, it's a message from the desert. He wants them to remember a time when God was with them always. When the Israelites were with Moses in the desert, they discovered who they were - God's Chosen People.

Seven centuries later, John the Baptist repeated Isaiah's message. John was literally in the desert - in the wilderness - preaching. His appearance alone was unexpected -

clothed in camel hair, feeding on locusts and wild honey, living out in the wilderness. And yet, crowds flocked to hear John preach. And that message again:

SCREEN: *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.”*

And to make that preparation, John then says “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” It was similar to the message that Jesus was about to proclaim; a message that all of us need to hear, digest and embrace again and again throughout our lives, just like Sydney Carton did in **A Tale of Two Cities**.

In Advent, we are given the opportunity to pause each day and reflect on our own need for a change of heart, and to seek the fulfillment of our deepest longings. What is it about ourselves that we want or need to change? What is it that we’ve hidden away and refused to bring into the light? Is it the fear that we have to take a risk and try new ways of behaving, or new relationships or new ideas? Is it a negative opinion of who we are? Is it the way we continually hurt ourselves and the people we love? Is it our complacency or our lack of trust? Is it our inability to enjoy life or our fear to love and to be loved?

Some things we can’t change – some things we can only accept and perhaps change our attitudes about. But we must acknowledge the part of ourselves that needs a little fixing up. Our tendency may be to deny to ourselves and to others that we are broken or wounded. Perhaps we cannot bear to name our shortcomings, our personal demons, for fear of being overwhelmed by what we might find. No one can love the “real” me, we think, and so to protect ourselves we project the most together self we can come up with. The invitation to each of us is to allow our true selves to be known – and therein lies not only our salvation, but our happiness as well, a life full of unexpected surprises.

The call for repentance that John the Baptist and Jesus asked for first of all requires that we acknowledge the presence of woundedness in our lives. Once I can speak the unspeakable, then I can hear the words of acceptance and forgiveness and get on with my life. The message for today is: don’t despair and don’t lose hope, instead turn to the Lord and begin again. Prepare the way so God can heal you, renew your faith, change your life and lead you back to the flock. It will be a far, far better thing we do than we have ever done.

As we began to do last week, we want to give you a few very practical ways you can turn to God and prepare to welcome Christ at Christmas.

SCREEN: Pray & Confess

On Thursday December 17th starting at 7pm, we will be offering the Sacrament of Reconciliation which includes individual confession and absolution, with a quiet time

and space in church. The lights will be dimmed, and you can come for some quiet, peace and meditation.

And if you feel so inclined, you can also celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation that night with either me or Fr. Mike - we'll both be hearing confessions. Consider taking advantage of this opportunity. See it as a mini desert experience to be alone with the Lord - to meditate on God's love for you. And if you aren't able to be here that evening, create a desert experience at home. Find a room, shut the door, turn off all your devices and take some time for God to speak to your heart. Start with 10 or 20 minutes. Committing to regular prayer can make an enormous difference in our lives and in our relationship with God and others.

SCREEN: Give

Our parish's Advent mission project, called the Giving Tree, has begun. Your donations will assist Assumption Church in Washington DC, the Gabriel Network which helps women dealing with an unplanned pregnancy, and the Bowie Interfaith Pantry.

Next Saturday evening, from 6:30pm-8pm you can drop off any of your donations outside of church, without having to leave your vehicle. The Church grounds will be decorated with lights and a special guest from the North Pole will be here to thank you. For more details, check out our bulletin and website.

Why is giving so essential to prepare for Christmas? When we freely give to help someone in need, we open up a space in our heart for God to enter in. Our priorities and purpose in life become clear - life is not about how much we get, but how much we give.

So that's one way for you to prepare the way of the Lord - give to those in need. The second way to prepare the way of the Lord is to carve out some space, to have our own desert or mountain top experience, so we can hear God clearly, gently calling you back.

SCREEN: look for unexpected blessings

The third and final way to prepare the way of the Lord this Advent is simply to be open to the unexpected ways God may come into your life.

Amazing and unexpected things are possible in Advent when we open ourselves up to God's grace. We can experience renewal and new life if we allow the Lord to smooth out the roughness of our hearts, lower the mountains of our pride, and raise us up from the valleys of despair and distraction. May we hear the voice of the Lord calling us to prepare the way and make room in our lives this Advent.