

When I was a kid I remember many adults complaining about how early stores put out their Christmas merchandise. But as I grew older I learned that stores aren't going to give valuable floor space to merchandise that isn't going to sell. They put Christmas stuff out in October because people want to buy it then!

What puzzles me is people. I was baffled by it again this year. November 1st - the day after Halloween, and my kids were still measuring the amount of candy they had gotten - not by the piece, but by the pound - and stores were already putting Christmas candy out to sell! Now obviously, if it wasn't going to sell they'd have put something else in that space. So that means that people were already in the market for even more candy!

I don't know about you, but I do think our culture spends way too much time and effort preparing for Christmas. Personally, by the time Christmas Day actually does roll around I'm sick of it! I've had enough of decorating and cards and parties and cookies and wrapping presents and cooking! And let's also face it - we've had enough of the holiday spirit

where in the midst of bitterly cold weather we pretend to be happy and nice to everybody. Somewhere in the dark depths of your mind - a part that you don't want to admit exists - you want to pick up the next Salvation Army collection kettle you see and throw it through the store window! No day can live up to all the work it takes to prepare for Christmas.

The church has long called for people not to prepare for Christmas the cultural way, but instead focus on advent. The problem is the themes of advent are so foreign to everything else going on in the world around us that they are just frustrating and annoying. Okay sure, maybe you feel like you're the next Ebenezer Scrooge in the making, but you don't want the run up to Christmas to be about the end of the world like our gospel reading suggests. And for the next two Sundays we encounter John the Baptist. All the world is singing *Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer* but the church is focused on a half-naked bug eating wild man running around the wilderness screaming at people to repent! How can that possibly prepare you for Christmas?

We'll find out about John the Baptist for the next two weeks. For today we'll see why focusing on the end of the world really is where we want to be at this time of year. Here's why.

While none of us may realistically expect the world to end in the next few weeks, time still marches on; and time doesn't allow for do-overs.

What tasks, what chores, what undone work do you have to do that you'd never forgive yourself if you didn't get done. One of the worst things I experience as a pastor is to be working with a family at the death of a loved one and to have a family member or several family members who didn't have a chance to say goodbye, or who were holding a grudge against the deceased and now regret it. Or who didn't connect as much as they had hoped through life and now can't do it. Now they have regret, they feel guilty and there is no way they can ever fix it. Time heals many wounds, but not all. It is a burden they will bear always.

Want to get ready for Christmas and have Christmas be a truly joyful experience? Then you may have a lot of work to do in Advent. The church's way of preparing for Christmas may be exhausting, but it has nothing to do with spending money or shopping or decorating or attending parties or baking cookies. It has everything to do with unburdening yourself from unnecessary loads you carry so that on Christmas you can be free.

Are there people you should reconcile with? Is there someone that if that person should die before Christmas you will feel guilty because there's something you've left undone with that person? Do you have destructive addictions or habits that you can't seem to beat - or perhaps that you keep secret, even from those people close to you; and you'd be ashamed if they ever came to light?

There's other things too. Are you financially over-stretched? Do you have too many unimportant irons in the fire right now? Are there things you see at work that are unfair or unethical, but you choose to keep quiet because it may cost your job or a promotion? Do you owe people things that you can repay now?

Are you involved in any activity at all that you find detestable, destructive or wrong? What burdens, worries and concerns are you carrying right now?

Advent is the time to recognize all of these things, and then do something about them. Advent is a short season - four weeks at most - so there isn't a lot of time. But there is enough time to make a start.

If I told you the best way to have a more meaningful Christmas was to take on a new spiritual discipline or pray more or read the Bible more, most of you would ignore that advice. And those who you who took it would probably try to cram one more thing into a schedule that is already too busy. But that is not what I suggest.

Have Advent be a time for unburdening, repenting and changing old ways that aren't working anymore, or maybe you shouldn't have started them in the first place. You may find Advent exhausting - the most exhausting Advent ever. But you will find yourself coming to the Festival of the Incarnation - a.k.a. Christmas - with an open mind, with a free heart, and a clear conscious. What a wonderful gift it would be to wake up Christmas morning and be free of guilt, burdens and anxieties! Sure the ham might not be cooked, and the gifts not wrapped, and the tree lights still not working right - but the unnecessary weight of the world you carry will be gone.

You will be able to freely focus on what is important. You can be a free and unencumbered child of God, made in the image of God. In Jesus' birth he did far more than just come to life as a human. More so he validated our humanness by taking it on himself.

Rejoice, be glad, for your Lord loves you. There is no point living even a moment of the life God has given you with silly burdens and guilt. Take time to be free of them. Use Advent to prepare for Christmas, so that from the deepest parts of your being to the smile on your face Christmas may truly be a celebration for you of God's love. Amen.