

In the name of the one holy undivided Trinity,
Amen.

Here we are at the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is one of those distinctly Christian seasons that is counter-cultural in just about every way. In Advent, we're invited to slow down, while our culture's pace is picking up. We're invited to stop and take stock of our lives and prepare our hearts for Christ, while our culture is embracing every possible holiday activity, bringing incredible distractions. Consumerism is on full tilt and I know that pretty much every place where Advent used to be in our culture has gone except one.

I know there's one little maybe insignificant point of Advent that has remained maybe in name only. It's the Advent calendar. These are really mainstream. You can go to Target and get an Advent calendar. But Advent calendars are tricky for those of us observing Advent, at least those chocolate kind that are so popular in our house. They are such a major source of temptation in Advent.

Every year, there's so much struggle in our household to wait and eat just one piece of chocolate a day at a time. And last year, one of my closest clergy friends sent me a Godiva chocolate Advent calendar. She wrote in the card, "For your self-care in Advent." Self-care, indeed. For the first few days, I looked so forward to opening that little window to find the delicious indulgent piece of chocolate waiting for me.

But then catastrophe struck. I arrived home one afternoon from the office to find every single window of the calendar opened and you guessed it, empty. Now, I will not name names here. Suffice to say for at least one of my children the temptation was just too great.

Of course, there's a lot more, much, much more to Advent in a lot of the fun traditions we have around Advent. I actually think we make Advent too small, not just in our culture but in the church,

even those of us, including myself, that observe it every year reverently and enthusiastically.

Father Mark reminded us last week that Advent is both about remembering Jesus' first coming as that babe in the manger, as well and, of course, perhaps more importantly, as his second coming. And we're told to prepare. To prepare for Jesus' second coming. But some of us wonder why? I think there's a little bit of confusion around it. Why exactly do we need to be prepared?

Are we worried that God will be angry? This idea seems to be communicated in those bumper stickers that read "Jesus is coming, look busy". And maybe that lesson we just read from Matthew's gospel today with John the Baptist screeching out about unquenchable fire feeds into this mentality, to this idea. But I earnestly believe we misunderstand not only that text, but how it relates to Advent preparation.

In our gospel we see John the Baptist and he is here railing against a specific group, the religious leaders. And the leaders represent those power structures of the day, certainly the religious system itself. And scripture, throughout the testaments, makes clear that God is in the business of deconstructing and destroying the structures and systems that do not bear fruit.

And that tree, that fig tree that's mentioned here, is always in scripture, a symbol of the temple establishment. And the Pharisees and Sadducees represent those who are claiming that their social standing is what saves them - it's by virtue of their birth into a good class, children of Abraham. They then would say they have a special status before God, and John is challenging that.

He's criticizing this entire system and way of thinking because it is upholding oppression. It is teaching a kind of divine favoritism. It was not bearing fruit as it should have been. In fact, this system was creating obstacles to others to draw near to God, to draw close to the heart and mercy of God. And so the passage here begs a question

for us. What structures, what systems today are in need of deconstructing?

You see that wheat that John refers to, that good wheat that is gathered into the granary in this passage represents those structures, movement systems, beliefs, the choices that draw us close to God. And the chaff to be burned away in that unquenchable fire are those structures, movements, the systems, beliefs and choices that are drawing us away from God. It's that simple.

Away from the love of God. And so in essence, John, we see, is speaking truth to the power here but is inviting us into that conversation and I think invites us to do likewise. But, going back to us, it urges us into a second question. What are the systems and structures that we're participating in? What belief systems are we clinging to that need to be burned away like the chaff that they are so that we can bear fruit? So that we, like the wheat, with God can bring about God's kingdom in our hearts and our wider world?

Because John has a cosmic vision here. It's an invitation to think bigger and more broadly than we normally do day to day. The second coming, the second Advent of Christ is not about a day or a moment of just seeing Jesus up in the clouds. It is about what that moment represents, what that symbolizes and means. It is the ushering in of the promises of God, the completion of God's entire purpose for the whole world, when God in Christ makes all things new.

And so when we hear the baptizer calling out to us, every Advent, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," it is with this cosmic vision in mind, prepare to participate in the ushering in of God's kingdom of love and righteousness. So how do we prepare for that?

One essential way to prepare is pretty simple. It's examining the choices we make each and every day with God's help that bear fruit in us and in our world. It's making choices based in love because every single day, we're either becoming more like

God, more like people transformed into the image of Christ or we're becoming less so.

What we do, what we choose to say or give, or even think, those simple daily choices are manifesting one reality or the other. And as a priest, I'm often present around the time of death. And I work with families after someone has died. And I can tell you that at the end of someone's life, it becomes clear what kind of daily choices they made. Those choices made them the people they were.

And I've seen that it is the totality of the millions of choices that led a person down a path to become more and more every day, people who brought either incredible love and joy to those around them or, and it's hard to say this, people who brought pain, brokenness and bitterness to those around them. And I've seen both.

C. S. Lewis writes, "Every time you make a choice, you're turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. After taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices all your life long, you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature, either into a creature that is in harmony with God and with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, its fellow creatures and with itself. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other."

I am in the midst of preparing for our Advent supper series and it's about heaven and the afterlife. And I have been really moved by the stories that I've read about those who have died, had these near-death experiences, NDEs. And I've read several authors from Eben Alexander to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. She is the great Swiss-born psychiatrist known for all that groundbreaking work on grief and death.

And her collection of NDEs, these accounts she collected, have been published. And she's written

extensively on this subject and on death and she seems to echo Lewis from her research. She writes, "After your death, you will begin to see that your life here is the sum total of every choice you have made during every moment of your life. You'll begin to realize that every word and every deed affects your life and has also touched thousands of lives."

My friends, Advent is really an incredibly gracious invitation to remember this, to prepare the way of the Lord, to accompany God in the work of burning away the chaff of all that opposes God in our lives and our world, and to just make choices that bear fruit, one day at a time.

Christ is with us and Christ is coming again to fulfill God's promises for us and our world. And we get to participate in that when we make choices and recognize that our choices have significance, significance into eternity. And we do that graciously with God's help. Thanks be to God.