

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

After Br. Emmanuel's excellent sermon last Sunday I told him I was going to start mine off with the acclamation "It is NOT here yet." After all, we rigorously avoid singing Christmas hymns until the Christmas celebration (at least at Church if not at home). You see, it may be here for the world, but it is apparently not supposed to be here for us Episcopalians.

But I have a confession to make. I really don't like Advent all that much. As a former Baptist I remember fondly the years in which I used to be able to spend this time merrily singing Christmas hymns and getting ready for the big day. But I was supposed to put all that aside after my confirmation. No easy thing for a man whose mother always puts up the Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving.

Now that I have become an Episcopalian it just seems to have taken all the fun out of it. This penitential Advent thing just doesn't feel right to me. It goes against all I want to do.

On the bright side of things though, now that I work at the prison I get the best of both worlds. The convicts have, for the most part, never heard of Advent and so out there we are merrily singing Christmas songs. And then here at St. Peter's we observe Advent and try and re-learn the Advent hymns for four weeks.

I'm not sure which I should feel guiltier for. Enjoying Christmas early or not teaching the prisoners about Advent.

However, this bi-polar Christmas life I am now living has gotten me thinking. Perhaps I have the whole thing wrong. Perhaps penance is not what Advent is all about at all, aside from all the purple around this place. Perhaps Advent is about a different P word. In today's Gospel we hear about another alternative word: preparation.

I think the key is to focus on preparation not penance. Now I am well aware that I'm going against centuries of church tradition with this radical thought. But it honestly seems to me to be the better alternative. After all our Advent hymns are not really penitential at all when you think about it. "Prepare the way", "glad tidings of the King of Kings", "Hark the glad sound", none of these sound very penitential to me.

Actually in all honesty this is not all that radical of a thought. Many parishes in the Episcopal Church have already made this transition by use of Blue as the liturgical color for Advent.

The reading from Baruch could only be described as anti-penitential. "An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church" does not even use penitential in the definition of Advent. It says Advent is a "time of preparation and expectation".

So I'm refusing to be penitential in Advent any more. I'm putting that aside. Now don't get too nervous. I'm sure I will not have an inspiration and decide to give up on Lent as well. I mean, I do have my boundaries.

Historically there is no mention of a penitential practice in Advent until the 6th Century

when one church writer indicated that the season before the Feast of the Nativity was to be observed “according to the Lenten rite of Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of the week.” Requirements for fasting did not begin until the 7th Century. (The Catholic Encyclopedia). So I can always argue that I’m going back to the historical roots of the Church.

But the truth of our situation is that no matter which way you prefer, penance or preparation, or both, the end result is the same. Christmas comes. And we welcome it with joy. So let us spend the next few weeks in eager anticipation and preparation to celebrate the birth of Christ, the arrival of God among us.

And so we now look forward to sharing the Advent mystery together. It will as always be a time of great anticipation, excitement, and expectation. Let us strive to keep the focus where it should be, on the coming Christ, and let us guard against the secular influence of the world around us that would seek to turn our eyes from the face of the living Jesus in a manger to the hustle and bustle of shopping, traveling, and buying presents.

You see our faith hinges on the birth of Jesus. In fact if Jesus was not born we are, quite frankly, wasting our time here. And if we allow our vision to be moved from the meaning of Christmas, from the Mass of Christ then we are likewise wasting our time. And it is deceptively easy in our society to allow our vision to be shifted. We are the wealthiest people on the face of the earth. In fact most people in North America are wealthier than Jesus ever was in the material sense. He didn’t have much at all in his life beyond the clothes on his back.

We have so many potential distractions. So much to draw us away from Jesus. So we must firmly fix our eyes on Jesus this Advent season as we prepare to celebrate his birth in a few weeks.

AMEN.