
How Are You Going to Get Ready For The Mystery of Christmas?

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Advent 1 – Year A

Well, we got our Christmas tree yesterday!

The magic elves from the King of Pops showed up with a beautiful tree already in the stand. They put it where we wanted it to go and gave Robert a vanilla popsicle. We took our annual picture with them. They said their good-byes and, after reminding us that trees need water, promised to return in January to pick everything up.

Our Advent had begun.

You see, the Christmas tree, at least for us, is one of the ways that we get ready for the mystery of Christmas. That is really what Advent is all about, getting ready for the mystery of Christmas.

We will do all of the other things too!

We will be back at 4:00 pm this afternoon for lessons and carols.

We will be here at 5:30 pm to make Advent wreaths and eat spaghetti.

We will put up an Advent calendar.

We will do all of those other things, but somehow putting up the tree has taken on a special significance for us. It serves as a journal of sorts, recording our experiences of Advent.

We won't decorate it right away or even all at once. The glory of the tree will emerge over time. It won't arrive in full until Christmas Day.

There's something about anticipating what the tree will finally look like that gets us ready for the mystery of Christmas.

I love how the Godly Play story talks about getting ready for this mystery.

Christmas is a great mystery, the story says, but mysteries can be hard to enter into. They can be so hard to enter into, in fact, that sometimes people walk right through them without even knowing that they're there.

Christ, for example, is coming as a king. Christ isn't coming like a normal king with great armies, wealth, and power. Christ is coming as a young child in a manger in a barn.

The risk, of course, is that you may miss Jesus if you don't know how to recognize him.

You will see, the story says, many people racing here and there, doing this and that. They will be running through the malls, always busy getting ready, preparing and then missing the mystery.

You'll need to know how to recognize Jesus when he comes.

And so, my question for you this morning is how are you going to get ready for the mystery of Christmas?

Now you might start with the gospel passage for this morning. (Mt. 24:36-44)

It's apocalyptic literature in all of its glory, seemingly full of judgment and its consequences.

We hear about the great flood that swept some of the people away while leaving others behind.

We hear about two women grinding meal together, one of whom will be taken away and one of whom will be left behind.

We hear about two workers in the field, one of whom will be taken away and one of whom will be left behind.

And then, as if to emphasize the point, we hear about the owner of the house who falls asleep, leaving his things vulnerable to the thief, who takes some of them away and leaves others behind.

I'm not immediately drawn to these stories.

It's hard for me to hear them without the accompanying voices of the left behind movement. You know, the ones that predict the rapture, promising that the faithful will be taken away and the rest of us will be left behind. The faithful will be snatched up, escaping the brokenness of this world and ushered into the paradise of the next. The rest of us will be left behind and ... well, you know how it goes.

As an alternative, you might turn to Paul's letter to the Romans. (Romans 13:11-14)

Paul uses rich imagery that has become important to Christian contemplative traditions. He calls the church to wake up from its sleep. He implores the church to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

But, again, it's hard to hear Paul's words without also hearing noncanonical voices insisting on a more contemporary cultural comment.

It can be hard to hear about people being awake without feeling some of the judgment that has come to characterize the loudest voices of the woke culture.

It can be hard to hear about people being warned about darkness without also feeling some of the anxiety of the hyper-sensitive voices who are worried that using such imagery somehow perpetuates racial discrimination.

These feelings make this scripture hard to enter into; they encourage us to look past it for a more comfortable way to get ready.

If we stick to the scripture, though -- sit with it and listen to it -- we might see a purposefulness there that we hadn't seen before.

In the gospel passage, for example, it's not initially clear whether the faithful are the ones being taken away or the ones being left behind.

The descriptions of the women grinding meal and the workers in the field usually capture our attention first and they can be interpreted in either way.

But, if you look at the example of the flood, you will see the focus shift to the ones being left behind.

It's the faithful who are left behind after the flood; they are the ones charged with starting over.

So, what is this passage saying about why we are here?

What if we are here not for the purpose of finding a way to escape, but for the purpose of making this place a home for God?

And, if that's the project that God created us to take on, then we should be looking for a Jesus who will help us get the job done.

We should not be looking for a king, armed with conventional power and looking to separate us from each other so that those perceived to be good can be rewarded and those perceived to be bad can be punished.

We instead should be looking for a young child in a manger in a barn, calling us to a higher level of consciousness that is capable of uniting us by integrating all of our different perspectives and transcending the disputes that they generate.

We won't find this child outside of us, standing off in the distance dictating our behavior and threatening our existence.

We'll find this child inside of us, encouraging us to wake up and remember the God in whose image we were created and into whose likeness we are to grow.

This Jesus is easy to miss if you don't know how to recognize him.

Let me tell you a story.

With my family's consent, I have taken over a room of our house.

It's an old porch whose screens have been replaced with glass windows. It's not big, but it's a wonderful, out of the way place to be. I have filled it with books, crosses, and icons. My family calls it the Chapel.

It's where I start each day – reading, praying, and, on a good day, awakening to the presence of God.

It has become sacred space to me.

So, there I was one morning, settled into the silence, when I heard the familiar sounds of Percy Jackson. Percy Jackson is the title character and narrator of a series of books by Rick Riordan based on the adventures of the Greek and Roman gods.

You may not know much about Percy Jackson yet, but our eight-year old son, Robert (who has given me permission to tell this story), loves Percy Jackson.

What he doesn't love are headphones!

I heard Percy Jackson coming down the stairs and opening the door to the bathroom.

I heard Percy Jackson going into the kitchen and exploring every shelf of the refrigerator.

I heard Percy Jackson making his way through the living room and felt him slowly, methodically closing in on me.

It began to feel personal, as if Robert was trying to be as disruptive as possible.

And, then, just as my irritation started to dress itself up as anger, I had an epiphany. It didn't appear gently, as an awareness might rise up in the midst of a meditation; it appeared suddenly, as if it had to fight its way into my consciousness. In that moment, I knew that the sounds I had heard – Percy Jackson's voice, Robert's movements, the opening and closing of doors, and the turning on and off of lights – were all sounds of joy.

Robert loves Percy Jackson and listening to those books in the morning, or really at any time during the day, makes Robert happy.

I began to feel a warmth in my chest that I recognized as one of the marks of gratitude. I knew then that I was privileged to be right there, right then, in that moment. I was privileged to be a part of Robert's life and in small ways to be able to create some space for him to grow up and develop his own conscious relationship with God.

This is what it looks like to recognize Jesus.

We become more aware of ourselves and in doing so grow closer to him.

Remembering these moments helps us to get ready for the mystery of Christmas.

Not all of the moments of recognition are welcomed experiences, though. The vulnerability can be overwhelming, and the losses can be much harder to take.

Think of the moment right after the tragic events of September 11, a moment when most of us had no sense of what was going on. We were disoriented, anxious, and confused.

Our collective vulnerability generated an outpouring of care and compassion, love and devotion.

Our minds dropped into our hearts as we heard the stories of what had happened.

Rescue workers and other first responders turned our thoughts into action as they put their own lives at risk to take care of strangers.

People in other parts of the world expressed their solidarity with us by declaring themselves Americans, at least for that day.

This too is what it looks like to recognize Jesus.

I want to leave you with one more image of what it looks like to recognize Jesus.

It's the image of the penitent thief hanging next to Jesus on the cross.

You remember the scene from Golgotha, the place called Skull. Jesus is placed on a cross. Two thieves are placed on crosses there as well, one on either side of Jesus.

One of the thieves takes on the voice of the leaders and the soldiers. It's a voice of derision and scorn. "Aren't you the Messiah?" he says, mocking Jesus. "Save yourself and us." (Luke 23:39)

But, the other thief, the penitent one, finds his own voice. It's a voice of wisdom and truth. At least in that moment, he knows who he is and accepts responsibility for what he has done. "In our case," he says to the other thief, "it is just, for we are receiving what we deserve for our actions. But this man (referring to Jesus) has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:41). Then, he goes on to ask for his redemption. "Jesus, remember me," he says, "when you enter your kingdom!" (Luke 23:42)

I love this image because it's an image of surrender.

In his last moments on this earth, when his life as he knew it is being taken away from him, he finds the courage and conviction to open his heart and trust that the gift will come.

How are you going to get ready for the mystery of Christmas?

Where will you look for Jesus and what will you be looking for?

You might start by opening yourself to God, despite the fear that such vulnerability kicks up.

It is the divine life in us that will recognize the divine life in Jesus.

Amen.