

"Faith: Where Preparation Meets Opportunity"

Zephaniah 3: 14 & 20 Luke 3: 7 & 18

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You already know that Advent is a time of preparation. With this in mind, I got to thinking about a popular saying, particularly in the realm of business, that "Good Luck is where preparation meets opportunity." Sometimes we human beings celebrate our good fortune, or lament the bad things that happen in our lives, and in both cases it is tempting to believe that the good or bad things that happen are completely out of our hands. Actually that is only partially true. Certainly there are those events that happen to us that are completely out of our control. Often people live their lives hoping to avoid such events entirely. Of course that is not possible to do all the time. Life still happens. However, I believe there is no shortage of opportunities for us to experience life in its fullness.

But are we completely passive recipients of whatever comes to us? I would suggest that we are not, and I believe the scriptures and the tenets of our faith back up my position. Take Advent for example: we take four weeks to get ready for Christmas. Of course it takes time to buy and wrap all those presents, to bake cookies, to travel to relatives, and to prepare holiday meals. But for our purposes, Advent is a time for getting ready to receive the spirit of the Christ child anew into our lives. We prepare in the hope of having a transforming religious experience.

The practical question has to do with how we get ready. Here's one approach. There is a wealth of wisdom about spiritual growth and transformation in the Twelve Steps of AA. I have come to believe that perhaps the most important step is number 6. You will not be surprised to hear that it deals with preparation. In Step 7 God is asked to remove the person's defects of character. It's like asking for a gift. However, Step 6 must be accomplished first: "We became entirely ready for God to remove our defects of character." Becoming ready for a change is a real challenge, but if that preparatory work is not done properly and thoroughly, the gift cannot be received.

There has always been a tension between the belief in God's power to affect change and the belief in our needing to make it happen by living right. Does God do it, or must I do it? We certainly have no power over the nature and quantity of blessings that are available to humanity. But we have a great deal of power to affect the degree to which we can receive the blessing. Take forgiveness for example. When we have done something hurtful or foolish, we cannot really experience forgiveness until we do the work necessary to forgive ourselves.

According to my observations and reading, we humans are mightily confused about who is responsible for what. From the perspective of family systems theory, in dysfunctional families people tend to confuse their legitimate areas of responsibility with those areas that belong to someone else. They want someone else to have the responsibility to make life OK for them, or they take responsibility for someone else's behavior, blaming themselves for not being good enough to make the other person happy.

Our task, then, is to figure out what our legitimate responsibilities are so we can embrace those without trying to pin them on others; and at the same time, to let others be responsible for their own behavior.

When it comes to relationship with God, human beings have a history of putting barriers in the way of experiencing the presence of the divine. We can get so busy in our lives that we allow too little room for awareness of the divine; we get caught up in our addictions, trying to fill an empty place inside that only healthy spiritual connection can fill; we hold on to our guilty feelings and self judgments, convincing ourselves that we don't really deserve the abundant life Jesus promised; and then we wonder why we don't feel divine Presence as much as we believe we ought to. The Advent season is the time to challenge our human tendencies to put up these barriers.

While our culture makes Advent a busy time, it may be helpful for us to find some quiet time and place where we can ask ourselves what we really want for Christmas. During this time, we can really explore what it would mean if we were to embrace the birth of the Christ child as a personal event. Jesus, whom we know as the Christ, is born for you! We could take time to say it out loud. "Jesus Christ is born into my life at Christmas! He brings new perspectives and new possibilities to my experience of life. He brings new meaning to my life."

We could also identify our guilty feelings and self-judgments. We could confess our shortcomings to God with the very real expectation that God would respond with a great transforming love. These suggestions are easy to say, but not so easy to do. They actually require faith. We are not easily talked out of our favorite guilty feelings, self-judgments, and shortcomings. It takes boldness and courage for us to open ourselves to divine perspective, not so much because we fear judgment, but because it is difficult to believe divine goodness is greater than our limitations.

We live in a universe of abundance. There is no shortage of the blessings open to us, but it takes faith for us to avail ourselves of the offer. Even with respect to the coming Christmas season. We can easily anticipate the celebration, but will we become ready to accept the gift? Can we receive the gift of the Christ child without the sense that we don't deserve it; in short, can we come to believe that the gifts of God are not given based on our level of deserving? Jesus taught that God's gifts are given freely as a natural expression of divine love to all of us.

You have heard me refer before to the various images of God that people carry. One of the most frequently held is an image called the "Santa Claus God." That is the God who is "Making a list, and checking it twice; going to find out who's naughty and nice." The implication is that the nice ones get blessings and the naughty ones do not. When we employ this image, we can't help but fear that we might have been "naughty," not even necessarily in our outer behavior, but in the scared places in our hearts.

A significant part of our preparation for Christmas is a bold challenge to that Santa Claus image of God. It is only when we can hold an image of God as infinitely loving and forgiving, always ready to bless us with abundant opportunities, that we can be truly open to receive the universal gift of the Christ child in a personal way.

When you bring together your willingness to prepare with your recognition of life's abundant provision of opportunity, then you can know faith in its most profound aspects. It does not matter whether things are going well or poorly in your life. The faith that springs from that place where preparation meets opportunity will tell you that divine presence and blessing is always available in your experience of life. As Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes, we will find our blessings in the heart of life's real, though difficult experiences.

When we do our preparation faithfully, we will then be more able to find God, perhaps in new and wonderful forms. Advent is the time of preparation. And Christmas is when we discover the greatest opportunity of all: that no matter how we conceptualize God, the freely given gift of divine relationship is born to us anew.