

In Christian understanding, Advent is a time to prepare for our Messiah's coming. The word "Advent" derives from the Latin for "coming close" or "approaching." In the popular mind, Advent is a time to get ready for Christmas. There is nothing wrong with this, except that it is not the traditional church understanding. The traditional construct of Advent is that we prepare for an accountability meeting with Christ the King, Christ in all his glory, Christ the judge of the quick and the dead. It is an apocalyptic thing, end of the world stuff, the anticipation of our Lord's "Second Coming." If this traditional approach to Advent is going to have any meaning for us today, though, I think we have to back off of the end of the world stuff, and look our accountably meeting with Jesus in a much more pragmatic way. I'm talking about when we meet Jesus face to face at the end of our days – not at the end of the world.

We ought to examine the lessons, today, in that context. John the Baptist had a way with words, and he didn't pinch them a bit in the Gospel reading this morning. "Repent!" John said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. He is coming with his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the floor with it." Comfort comes from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah. "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge; with equity he will make his decisions. He will bring us a peace, as when the wolf dwells with the lamb, the leopard lies with the kid, the cow and the bear feed together; and a little child shall lead them." What we have here is two opposing poles of Advent. We are called to live in the tension of these two polls, a pole of hope and a poll of dread. The hope is for salvation; the dread is our fear that somehow we do not measure up. The living in this tension keeps us honest. In this tension, we prepare to meet Jesus.

If we are going to stand before Jesus as judge and present our lives to him as evidence of our love and our loyalty to him, should we not examine the way that we have lived and are living our lives? We have no claim on God. We can't say to God, "You owe us because Jesus died for us," any more than the Pharisees and Sadducees could say to God, "You owe us because we are the children of Abraham." We can only say to God, "We love you, as you have told us we must love you, and we love our neighbor as we love ourselves." Love is the standard by which God will judge us. God has no other standard.

So Advent, I think, is essentially a time for measuring ourselves as lovers. Where we fall down, we need to shape up. When we struggle, we need to reach deep and find the courage to do what we know is right. Advent encourages us to realize that we may not be able to always completely undo the mistakes of the past, but surely we can avoid repeating them in the future. Advent is a perfect time to take a spiritual inventory of our lives. We should pray, "Show me how I offend you, Father, and how I act in un-loving ways to others; and, give me courage to change the things that I can change and the ability to love myself enough to accept those things about me that I cannot change." Only when we do this can we have the peace in our hearts offered us in Christ. *Amen.*

