

Today we enter a transformational, even magical time of year: for this is... the weekend between Black Friday and Cyber Monday, and there are only 27 shopping days left until Christmas! It is time to spread sweetness and light among your loved ones by making all the right purchases. Deck the halls! Contemplate Rudolph! Be overwhelmed by the magic and joy of the season — at any cost! It is also the first Sunday of Advent.

Strangely enough, this year I am ready for Advent. I am ready to burrow into its blue shadows. I am ready to wander through its murky mysteries. I am ready to embrace its open-ended darkness. I am ready to hear the stories and learn the lessons which this season has to teach us - stories about how to wait, lessons about how to repent, teachings about how to endure in the middle of the night, when burdens weigh down and anxiety overcomes. Yes, I am ready to figure out how to be a faithful Christian at times when Jesus seems far away and the world seems ready to fall apart.

It's all there on your calendar and it's all your time. And then there's God's time. It's all contained within the circle of the Advent wreath, the wreath with the first candle lit this morning. It's the beginning of Advent, the beginning of the church year, that big wheel of time that every year turns us from the waiting of Advent to the joy of Christmas, to the waiting of Lent to the joy of Easter, to the waiting of Eastertide to the joy of Pentecost, to the joy of life in ordinary time and back again. So turn their energies toward cultivating the earth and not destroying it. Here is the span of God's time we enter this morning. This candle marks the beginning of the time we will spend with the prophet Isaiah, that prophet from the Hebrew Scriptures known and trusted and quoted by the writers of the New Testament. The light of this candle infuses today's readings. Isaiah implores his listeners to walk in the light of the Lord into the kingdom where people do not learn how to make war but instead to make peace, to beat their swords into plowshares.

We Christians can make an effort to avoid the Holiday Chaos, as we begin Advent with this decidedly unfestive passage from Romans. Isn't Christmas the season for reveling, for an extra cocktail, for coveting and bragging about our presents? But here comes bah-humbug St. Paul, saying, "Let us live... not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy." What a grinch!

And yet, this is not because the Church is so puritanical that it can't sully its hands with the extra eggnog or Cyber Monday deal; it's not because the Church doesn't have a sense of joy that we keep a holy Advent. Instead, we as a Church keep the season of Advent because we are not interested in buying fake joy. We only care about the real thing.

The world's idea of pleasure is really just getting to a point at which our cravings leave us alone. You can eat three helpings of ham and four pieces of pie, but this rarely imparts actual joy — instead, you end up feeling ill — and in the longed-for gift, the joy is, at best, only momentary and fleeting.

St. Paul doesn't tell us that this isn't really the season to be jolly, instead, he tells us to, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." For St. Paul, the desires of the flesh are not only sensual desires, but all of the impulsive desires that rule us: the desire for revenge, the desire for wealth, the desire to prove others wrong, the desire to be seen as important by others — make no provision to gratify any of these, says St. Paul, but instead, put on the armor of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the desires of the flesh, joy is only a glimpse, a passing moment, if it's experienced at all. The only lasting joy is found in the source of all goodness, all peace, all love — in God. Advent is the season in which we look past Christmas and await the day on which we will meet God face-to-face.

In today's Gospel, we read about the Second Coming of Jesus; the great, awe-inspiring day, when the Son of Man returns. There is a modern "left behind" theology that paints the Second Coming of Christ as the worst thing ever to happen to humanity, but for the Apostles and all of the Mothers and Fathers of the Early Church, the second coming of Christ was seen as the best thing ever to happen to the world.

Instead of praying to be raptured away and not have to face Christ's return, the early Church prayed daily "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and one of the oldest Christian prayers that has come down to us is so ancient that it wasn't written in Greek, but in Aramaic, the native language of the Apostles: this prayer is Maranatha — Come, O Lord! It is a prayer literally begging Christ to return ASAP!

The end of time is not the terrible destruction of the world, but its restoration, its healing, its perfection. In this life, we catch only fleeting glimpses of the nature of God: in an embrace, in a joyous conversation, in a beautiful object, in a delicious meal — in these, we have intimations of what pure goodness is, what pure love or beauty is.

But at the end of time, God, who is the actual source of all joy, all peace, all light, all love, will permeate every fiber of creation. St. John tells us that on that day there will be no light from the sun nor moon, because they will be as nothing compared to the light radiating from the face of Christ, from the throne of the Father, from the presence of the Holy Spirit. The fire of the glory of God will radiate from all things and fill the New Creation.

Jesus tells us to be ready, to keep watch, so that on the last day, at the return of our Lord. Let us not turn our backs on the greatest gift ever given: the gift of absolute joy, absolute peace, absolute love, the gift of perfect unity with God.

So how do you go about waking up this Advent? How do you prepare for the end of time? First of all, love God: make your relationship with Him your top priority, putting God above wealth, health, status, safety, and everything else; remember that worshiping God in church, praying, and reading Scripture each day are the most profoundly important things that you can do. And then love your neighbor, love every living icon of God, as you love yourself: overcoming selfishness in giving freely to those in need, overcoming pride through acts of kindness and humility, overcoming sin with love.

Not because God, like Santa, will reward us for being good little boys and girls, but so that you can detach yourself from these impulses, so that you can forget the temptations and accept the fullness of God instead. And then, on the final day of the resurrection of the dead, when you awake from death and stand before the great judgment seat of Christ, you won't be filled with disappointment and dread — you won't be filled with materialist longing — but instead will see in Christ the fullness of eternal joy.