

Why Not Now?!
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Although I try not to drive *anywhere* on the Friday after Thanksgiving, I had to this year. Would you believe it was to get food? Go figure! Anyhow, as I was on the way home I pulled up to a stop light. And there it was, right on top of the car in front of me: my first Christmas Tree sighting of the season. My initial reaction was, “Already!? Isn’t this a little soon?” But then I remembered I had seen my first sign of **Christmas** *even earlier*. In some store or another there were Christmas lights wound around a display. All I can remember is my surprise at seeing them. Guess what day *that* was? }{ November first! One day after Halloween that store was ready: they want Christmas, and they want it *now!*

For whatever reason, each year seems like a race to see who can unfurl the lights and set up the tree first. The inevitable sugar cookies will begin making the rounds soon—not to mention cakes adorned with mutant green cherries and other transfigured fruits. The persistent, gentle tintinnabulation of Salvation Army collections already provides the soundtrack to many parking lots, as surely as Muzak© versions of carols do for nearby stores. And I would bet that Santa is already making the rounds to visit with children in shopping malls, too. We want our Christmas, and we want it *now!*

What’s the rush? I can understand why businesses make such a fuss. Apparently Black Friday is the day that many stores first become financially profitable for the year. So, it makes sense for store owners to promote the mad, spending driven dash toward Christmas. But what is our stake in it? Now, don’t get me wrong, I love Christmas—especially on the years when my children are with us on the big day, as they are this year. I get caught up in it, too. I also want to sing the occasional Christmas carols at this time of year, and celebrate, and all the rest. It *is* a lovely season.

But it seems really strange that we do so much celebrating of Christmas before it happens instead of properly celebrating it when it arrives. By *proper celebration* I mean two things: both the *length* of Christmas; and the way that we celebrate during that time. After the bright blur of holiday parties and celebratory eating, it can be easy to feel done with Christmas by the time December 26th rolls around; or certainly by New Year’s Day. But, in fact, the Mass of Christ’s Birth, that is, Christmas, is a twelve day celebration. The days of December 25th through January 6th are all part of Christmastide. Yet, how many of us spend the whole twelve days celebrating Christ’s birth? I absolutely *love* the idea of a twelve day celebration, and I can’t even convince *my own family members* to give each other a series of little gifts over more time instead of having a present avalanche on Christmas morning. If you ever have better luck with your own families, please let me know your secrets!

Many of us love Christmas because it is in this season that we get to encounter the baby Jesus—cute; innocent; fragile. There is a lot to love about babies. They stir up powerful emotions of love and care and tenderness. It can be easy to get caught up in adoring a baby. But when we kneel at the manger to adore the baby Jesus, we need to see beyond that moment to really open

ourselves to what Christmas is all about. We need to remember that the baby grows up. And right fast, too, in the liturgical year! Within two or three weeks of Christmas we will be hearing stories of Christ's adult life all over again.

And I think that is all to the good. Because the baby Jesus, while adorable, is not the man who teaches, heals, and performs miracles. He is not our Savior, even though he is the kid *who will be* some day. We need to look into the manger of the Christ child fully aware of *his whole life*—not just his special birth, but the whole scope of his teaching and ministry, his seeming defeat and surprising resurrection, and his ongoing presence with us in our lives right now. Because the deepest message of Christ's birth is that heaven and earth are joined in him. He is somehow fully human and fully divine. And that co-mingling of supposed opposites in one human being reminds us that the same possibility dwells within all human beings.

Each one of us can abide with God in the way Jesus did. That is the core of his teaching to me, even the very path of discipleship. Not just to love and honor and bow down to Jesus, but to actually strive to be *like* Jesus. That is how I interpret Paul's call in this morning's reading for believers to "put on the armor of light."¹ We are called to clothe ourselves in God's light just like Jesus did. We draw nigh to God, so God will return the favor.

And I think we need to hold on to that understanding as we journey toward the Christmas season. Today is the first day of *Advent*, after all, and Christmas is twenty eight days away. Despite the mad dash of commercialism toward the big day, it will be awhile yet. Today we are called to *begin* to prepare the way for the Christmas event; to prepare the way for heaven and earth to join not just long ago in Jesus, but *right now* in our hearts and souls. *This* is the work of Advent.

Which makes me want to ask God a question: why not *now*?! Why not right now in each and every one of us? We have been retelling the sacred stories of Jesus for close to two millennia. We say that we prepare our hearts for Christ's arrival as we move toward Christmas and Easter, every year. What would we do if Jesus came home fully this year? Any thoughts?} {

On some level, it is a truly terrifying prospect. When Jesus around comes again, we will be out of excuses, right? We won't be able to procrastinate any more. The boss will be home, and the gig will be up. And then what?

Our wreath lighting readings work with the short passage from Romans to offer a glimpse of how things will be when Jesus returns. Here are some gems to ponder. From the second chapter of Isaiah:

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.²

God will be above all, not the madness of commercialism, commerce and fluctuating economic crises. Holiness will be exalted over struggle and unity will be exalted over disparity. Isaiah continues:

¹ Romans 13:12c.

² Isaiah 2:2.

(T)hey shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.³

All the ingenuity and cunning that we focus on finding ways to turn against each other will be redirected. Tools of war will be replaced by tools that sow the seeds of prosperity and well being for everyone. Psalm 122 reads, in part:

Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.” For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.” For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.⁴

The sakes of our families, friends and God will be bound together in peace and goodness. It doesn't sound too terrifying, does it? In fact, it sounds a lot like things we hope and pray for together on Sundays, and probably more often in our personal prayers. The question before us on this first Sunday in Advent is what are we going to do about it? Will we barrel through the bright blur of the season focusing on wrapping presents and getting to all the parties and filling up or time while draining our souls? Or will we use this time as a time for contemplation to prepare the way of the Lord? When Christmastide arrives, will we kneel at the manger just long enough to adore the baby, or will we dwell in the season pondering its deepest meanings and striving to abide with God, and to bring heaven and earth together?

Paul tells us that it is time for us to wake from sleep and to put on the armor of light. He assures us that salvation is nearer now than when we became believers. What if he is right? What if we are standing on the brink of another in-breaking of the realm of God within everyday lives? What if it could be *right now* that Christ was born again in our hearts and souls and lives, and we could be agents of change for God's hopes for us?

These are the questions I encourage you to visit and revisit as you journey through Advent and into Christmastide. Hold open the door for the coming of the Lord. Slow down the dash toward Christmas so you can abide in, and savor, its deepest meaning. Welcome the thought of heaven and earth coming together and transforming everything. After all, *why not now?*!

May it be so! Come, o come, Emmanuel!

Amen?

³Isaiah 2:4.

⁴Psalm 122:7-9.

Romans 13:11-12

11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;