

Preparation

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the second Sunday in Advent, December 7, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

On December 7, 1941, fifty six years ago this day, Japanese aircraft attacked, without warning, the U.S. Pacific Fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. ~~The air raid crippled the US Pacific fleet.~~ Within hours, four of the eight battleships moored at Pearl Harbor had gone to the bottom, and almost 200 planes had been destroyed. Japan had been secretly preparing for the attack for months. They had prepared a striking force of six air craft carriers and a supporting force of battleships and cruisers. The date of December 7 had long been fixed. The attack began before sunrise. 360 aircraft took part; bombers escorted by fighters. At 7:55 a.m. the first bomb fell. 94 ships of the US Navy were present in the harbor. 8 battleships of the Pacific fleet were the prime targets. By 10 a.m. that battle was over. The battleship *Arizona* had blown up. The *Oklahoma* had capsized. The *West Virginia* and *California* had sunk. Every other battleship except for the *Pennsylvania* had been heavily damaged. Over 2000 Americans had lost their lives. Near 2000 others were wounded. Japan had prepared well but the US was totally unprepared for the attack. The navy was unprepared. President Roosevelt was unprepared. The soldiers on the island and their families were totally unprepared for the attack. Some men and women had gone to bed on Saturday night prepared to go to church on Sunday morning. Some awoke early, before the attack began, thinking about the noon meal they had to prepare. Some were thinking about the guests they had prepared rooms for on Saturday. They were prepared for many things but they weren't prepared for the attack. Lack of preparation can mean disaster.

This week many college students *should* be preparing for finals. Some haven't studied much all semester and now realize that the final judgment is at hand. The wise college student has been preparing all semester, from the first day of school. They have taken time to relax and to party but they have given priority to studying, to preparing for the quizzes and tests and final exams. Some of you may remember how you put off studying. You put off doing the research

for that term paper. You partied too much. You spent too much time watching t.v. And then, all of sudden, you realized that you're in the closing weeks of the semester. Final exams are coming. And so you stayed up all night doing the research and writing our term paper. You stayed up all night cramming for final exams. How I envied those students who had worked a little bit each day preparing for their term papers and exams. We Christians need to do our homework. We need to study in order to prepare the way of the Lord.

Failing a class is disaster enough but lack of preparation can ~~mean~~ lead to far greater consequences. If I need serious surgery, I want a surgeon who is well prepared. I don't want a surgeon who comes into the operating room drunk. I don't want a surgeon who has stayed up all night partying. I don't want a surgeon who just squeaked through medical school. I don't want a surgeon who got into medicine merely because it pays well. I want a surgeon who is well prepared. I want a surgeon who has genuine concern for her patient and who has carefully prepared to meet the challenge because, above all, she wants to see people healed. Christians need to be every bit as prepared as a surgeon to bring the healing of Christ to a dying world.

God wants his people to be prepared. There's a lot at stake. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Why? Because God wants all flesh to see the salvation of God. God longs for all people, everywhere, to accept the gentle reign of Christ in their hearts. God is not willing that any should perish. God wants Americans to see his salvation. Europeans. Africans. Asians. All people. All ethnic groups. All religious groups. Our friends and neighbors and relatives.

Christians need Christ every bit as much as Buddhists and the followers of Islam. Christianity is not better than any other religion. And Christians are often not as prepared as Buddhists and agnostics to receive Christ into their hearts and lives. Many Christians virtually live their lives without Christ. We don't pray. We don't read the Scriptures. We don't seek reconciliation. We don't seek forgiveness. We don't come to Church prepared to see the Lord. And too often we join the church without being prepared to take part in the hard work of road building. We need to prepare our hearts for Christ every bit as much as those who are not

Christians. God wants his people to do everything necessary to build roads and break down the walls that keep people from knowing and trusting Jesus.^{He wants us to build roads to young people ... older ...} God has given Christians, especially, the responsibility of moving every barrier that keeps people from knowing Christ.

God wants us to straighten up our own act. How can we expect the unchurched to see the salvation that comes to us in Christ if Christians can't get along with one another? Or if Christians have priorities that are no different from non-Christians? How can we expect the unchurched to see the salvation that comes to us in Christ if Christians simply don't care if their neighbors and friends and relatives come to serve Christ within the church? When I take communion to shut ins I close the service with a prayer. I pray, "Gracious God, we pray that you will so fill us with your Holy Spirit, that the life of Jesus may be seen more clearly in us, and the remainder of our lives be spent in your love and service." We need to prepare our hearts so that People will see Christ in us.

Christ constantly reached out to include those who were excluded. Our neighbors and friends need to see his Spirit in us. The deacons help to prepare the way of the Lord through their distribution of food baskets at Christmas. But one of the top priorities of this church must be to prepare the way of the Lord twelve months of the year.^{Find ways to build roads to the shut-ins, new residents, inactive ...} This should be emphasized in new member classes. All of our members need to be reminded on a regular basis that one of primary reasons of our existence is to prepare the way of the Lord so that those outside may see the salvation of God. The session needs to keep this before them throughout the year. We need to prepare the way of the Lord so that those outside will see the salvation of God. Disciplined worship, private prayer, Holy Communion, Bible-reading and study, and fellowship in active Christian work are some of the ways we can prepare the way of the Lord.

God has made us stewards or overseers of this building. This building was constructed to be one way to lead people to Christ. The sanctuary holds about 400 people. Good stewardship requires that we remove every barrier that keeps people from worshipping with us. It's simply not good stewardship to have a sanctuary this spacious unless we are willing to do the hard work of preparing the way of the Lord, making his paths straight and doing everything to encourage

and invite our friends and neighbors. And when people come we need to go out of our way to greet people. To welcome people. To express real concern for them and for their relationship to Christ.

Advent is the season of preparation in the church year. We're all anxious to get to Christmas. We wonder why we aren't reading the Christmas story. Instead we're reading about John the Baptist. We read about John the Baptist during Advent because God used him to prepare the way ^{for} of the public ministry of Christ. Many people came out and repented and prepared themselves. But many didn't. Many of God's people were totally unprepared for the coming of Jesus. They did not recognize him as their Messiah. So the Christian church, on the Second Sunday of Advent, reminds Christians that we can very well fail to recognize Christ in our midst. Don't miss Christ in the preparations for the Christmas holidays. Advent is a time for spiritual preparation. *Let every heart prepare him room*, John Wesley wrote in his hymn, *Joy to the World*. We prepare for Christmas. We buy Christmas presents. We put up Christmas trees and decorate. ~~We send out our Christmas cards and greetings. We prepare for big Christmas~~ meals with friends and families. We prepare for Christmas parties. In all our preparing, prepare as well for the Lord. Why? So that all people everywhere will see the salvation of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: God of our salvation, you straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the paths made rough by sin. Keep our conduct blameless, keep our hearts watchful in holiness, and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near; your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Eternal God, as you led your people in ages past, you direct our journey into the future.

We give you thanks that you came to us in Jesus Christ, and we eagerly await his coming again that his rule may be complete and your righteousness reign over all the world.

Then we will feast at his royal banquet, and sing his praises with the choirs of heaven.

By your Spirit, open our eyes to the generosity of your hand, and nurture our souls in all spiritual gifts.

Fill us with gratitude overflowing that we may share life and love in praise to you, God of all the ages, in the gracious name of Jesus Christ, your Son, by the power of your Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.